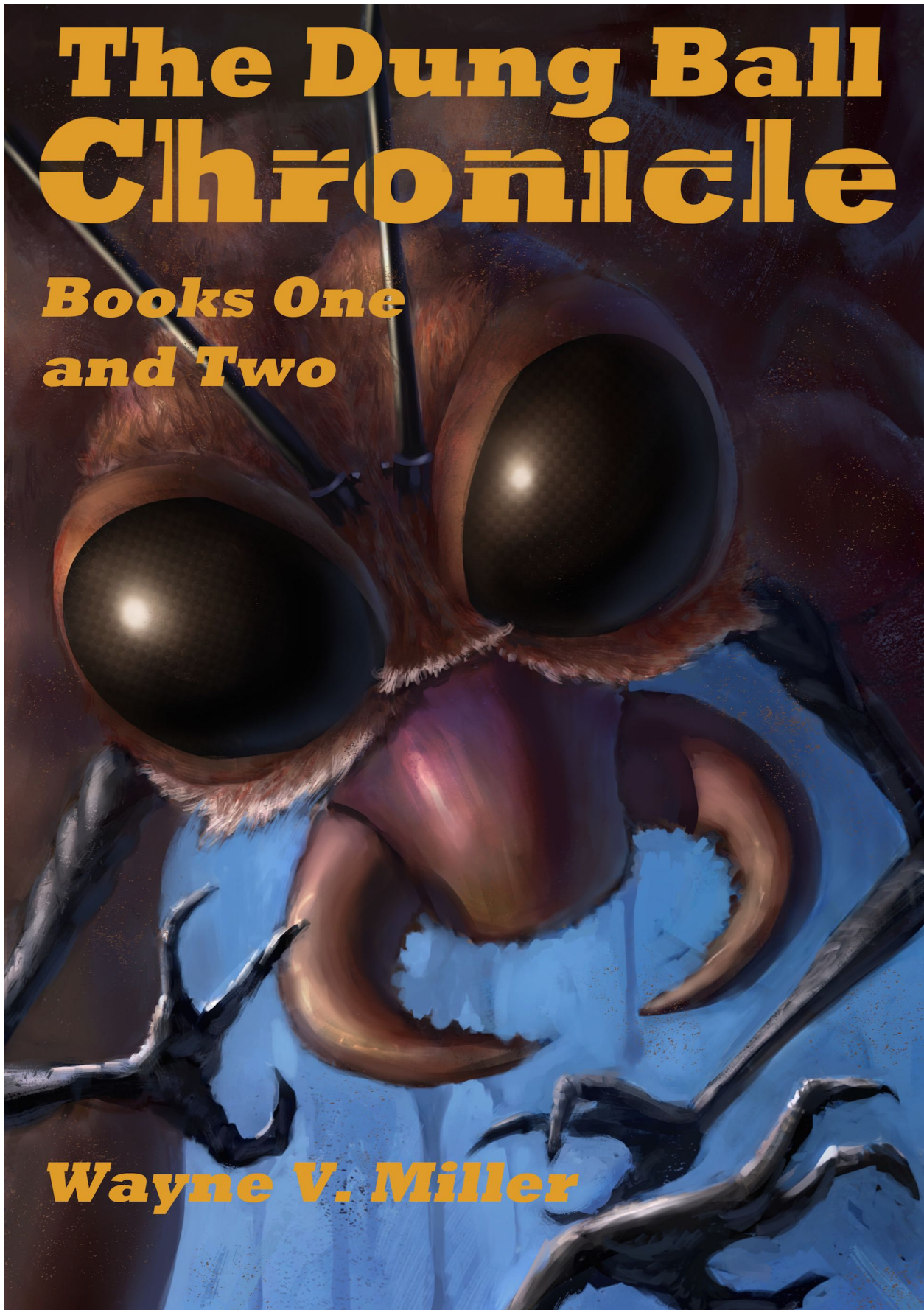


The Dung Ball Chronicle

**Books One
and Two**

Wayne V. Miller



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Books One and Two

By Wayne V. Miller

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Book One:
The Bog Monster of Booker Creek
New Edition

Dear Brett,

Just to be clear – the bog monster was always me, never anything or anyone else. I wish I could have explained this to you in a way that made sense to you. I'm starting a record of what happened, but I won't share it with you until you're older, maybe when you're twenty-five, old enough to chuckle at your off-kilter old man but young enough to remember how we survived the frenzy together. You were tough, tougher than I could have imagined, but I wish I could have done more to protect you. Maybe you'll understand when you read this.

I am going to lay everything out from the beginning. You were an eighth grader at Phillips Middle School, a tall, lanky, skinny-armed boy, with pale skin and zits, a sometimes goofy smile that I saw you cultivate in front of the mirror – which fit with the oversized cat-in-the-hat headwear you wore sometimes to parties – and yet there was a penchant for the pained look of the only child. Your mother and I were worried about you because you started to bottle up, withdraw from the kids you had played with just a year before. Nothing seemed to interest you much; you watched too much TV, played too many video games, and lay around the house like an unacknowledged secret. Then the assignment came.

It was the worst kind of schoolwork – requiring your parents' attention and time, too. Your mother helped as much as she could, invited your schoolmates to come over and snack and work, but in the end she came to me and said, "John, you need to get involved." I was happy about being needed, but not about the position it put me in. "What is it?" I asked. She didn't answer, which wasn't a good sign.

Your science teacher, Mr. McGrath, had mastered the fine art of overblown homework: exquisitely defined projects whose purpose was known only to himself and his God; repetitive components adding up to an ungodly sum of points so that the whole seemed like a giant scramble; and a scope that knows no bounds, apparently on the assumption that thereby Mr. McGrath is not stifling the creative ones. This meant that the best projects were done primarily by parents, and students shrugged their way to a grade they didn't deserve. I wasn't going to fall into line. You were going to do the project, whatever it was.

"Brett," I asked from your doorway. "What is this project your mother asked me to look at?"

"Huh?" you said, looking up from a hand-drawn comic you were working on.

"The project?"

"Oh that," you said, looking back down at the sheet. "I dunno." The pencil started moving again.

"Let me see the project description," I said, and you pointed at your notebook without stopping. That particular habit of yours always irritated the heck out of me, but I decided to let it pass. I opened the notebook, but you had to point me to the page, which did finally distract your attention, in fact so much that you decided to reread the instructions yourself, until I yanked them from you.

Environment. Biology. Something about statistics. McGrath's explanation didn't enlighten me, but the examples set the light bulb off. My favorite was "Scat-ology": "Map out a wooded area and comb it for wild animal scat. You'll need a good animal-tracking book. What does your research tell us about wild animal populations? Use an appropriate graphing technique." No surprise that Doreen deferred this one to me. I asked you what your team had decided on, and with hems and haws you laid it out: you were going to search old police blotters – from the days when the police were animal control – for reports of marauding animals, in order to develop a scatter plot of animals who lived in proximity to people but who found it difficult to co-exist. You speculated about wolves, bears and badgers. I thought more likely: rabid raccoons and stubborn skunks.

Jared's father was a police officer, and Jared had said that he could get the information without problem. You didn't know whether he had asked his father about this or not. I smelled some wishful thinking, but at the same time a hint of success. You seemed surprised by my reply: "This could be mapped." Of course, it was a perfect match, since I was in charge of Orange County's Geographic

Information System (GIS), and I'd already offered to show you how it worked. "Cool," you said before becoming absorbed again.

The topic waited for another week, until we reached a point where the deadline was impossible to ignore. I called up Jared's father to see if he'd been brought into the loop. "Oh, we talked about it a couple weeks back," he said with obvious irritation, "but he was going to find another project. We don't have blotters at the station, or even criminal records, from far enough back in time to be of use to the kids. I suggested they try the county museum or the Chapel Hill Reporter, but I don't think there's anything out there." At that second, I was trying to imagine how we could bring this into the present and get at existing data – Animal Control and road kill statistics? Nothing pleasant came to mind.

I confronted you the next morning at breakfast. "No worries, dad," you said and kept eating your cereal. "What do you mean, no worries?" You waved me off and said, "Jared's got it handled. He called the county museum and they have police blotters going back 100 years. We're going there this weekend." Oh, I thought, you might have told me. But I was equally surprised and pleased that it *was* handled.

Or seemed to be. I ended up driving you all to Hillsborough on Saturday. The team was you, Jared, Frank and Billy. The curator wasn't at the museum when we got there, so we wandered down the main drag in Hillsborough, past the historic courthouse and down to the river park. Eventually, we came back up and only then read that the museum was open every other Saturday. We had already packed into the car when we saw the curator walk with peculiar purpose to the door, open and close it carefully behind him. "Jared," I asked for the first time, "did you tell him we were coming today?"

"Sure," he said immediately and with gusto, then: "I mean, I told him. I don't remember if he said anything." I just looked at him. After I thought I made my point, I sighed and added, "Well, let's go see what he'll say now." I thought that was pretty equanimous of me.

You all piled out of the car and chatted and gravitated to the door without seeming to pay one bit of attention. A slight rain was threatening to turn into a downpour. The front door was locked, so I knocked. After some time, the curator came with a pained look to the door, but I doubted the curmudgeonly show.

"What can I do for you gentlemen?" he said, peering at each one of us over his glasses, stopping longest on Billy, who is black.

I waited in vain for Jared to explain what was up, so I said: "We were hoping we could see some records today. The boys have a biology project, and they want to look at animal control or police reports to see what kinds of animals end up in conflict with people." That seemed pretty cogent to me.

"That doesn't make any sense to me," he said to me. Then he looked back at Billy, as if speaking directly to him. "Can you boys explain what you want with the Orange County Museum?" Frank and Jared both started talking at once, and at one point Billy cut in, but Jared finally got them to settle down: "We want to see your historical police blotters," he said with a final smile.

"I see," he said. "Well, we don't have a public collection."

"Oh, okay," said Jared, as if that were it. I can't tell you how badly I felt like sticking my index finger in that guy's chest and telling him something about jerking people around. I decided I should let you all resolve this.

Frank said: "We have an assignment."

"Have your teacher talk to me, then," the curator said, with a peculiar smile.

Billy added: "He gave us an assignment, but this is our idea. We really want to do a good job."

The guy registered as completely unimpressed, so it surprised me when he said, "All right, I think there's something here that can help you." We followed him in. He explained that a Chapel Hill resident had clipped the police blotter from local papers for 50 years, and had, when he died, bequeathed the entire yellowing and brittle mess to the county. The boys brought up three large musty cardboard boxes from the cellar, and we took turns pulling out a sample and trying to figure out what we had.

“If you agree to describe the contents of each box on one of these forms,” the curator said, “I’ll let you examine them. Here, though. Nothing leaves the museum. Policy.”

Jared had a giant smile, though the other three – yes, you included – had the look of sheep seeing their new guard dog for the first time: hang-dog and alert all at once.

So there you were digging through decaying newspapers and talking all over each other about how you were going to score the hits. It took a fair amount of time before you all realized, seemingly at once, that there were no hits: no jackals, no wolves, no panthers, no raccoons, not even a rampaging swamp rat. There was a long slow letdown. Even Jared didn’t know how to solve this one; he looked to me.

“How about property damage?” I said after a bit.

“We want to do wild animals,” said Jared.

“No, what if you look at property damage and see from the description whether a wild animal was involved? You’ll have to do some guesswork, but you ought to be able to tease out some cases.”

Jared looked to you to see if you were able to translate this, but you had no better sense of what I meant. It seemed like an admission of defeat to you all, but after a long hem-and-haw session I said, “Look, just start collecting property damage reports – what was damaged and whether the cause is identified – and let’s just see what comes out, okay?”

We finally got started for real, and it didn’t take long for the property damage cases to start rolling: car accident, neighbor busting a fence, break-in, a case of arson, garbage dumping, tree falling on a shed, and so on. Then someone, Frank I think, read aloud: “Chicken coup was opened from the top and six chickens were taken.”

“Wow,” I said, to get everyone’s attention, “does the article talk about what did that?”

He scanned the page. “No, there are just a few words about broken planks.”

“That must have been something big. A bear maybe?” I said and looked around. No one thought much of that suggestion, and the collective-you dropped your noses into the boxes again. I had to make the rounds a few times to convince you all to note enough details: whom, where (reported location and source), when, what, why (speculate if necessary) and who (modus operandi, if unknown).

We were there two hours, working away, before you all became too noisy and distracted to continue. You, Jared and I returned one time after we had processed some data to see if further searching substantiated our findings – which it did.

You never liked my summary of events. I have Jared’s version, from an interview he gave early on:

Reporter: So, how did you get on the trail of this creature?

Jared: We wanted to find out what wild animals were harassing people. Our assignment was to map how wild animals and people interfaced over time, as more and more people moved in. We couldn’t get data about wild animals directly. What we got was police reports from old newspapers.

Reporter: What did the police reports tell you?

Jared: That there was a pattern of property damage along a creek. That made us believe that a large animal was living there. It wasn’t until we looked at the kinds of damage more closely that we had to eliminate all kinds of animals except one – *Homo sapiens*.

Reporter: But you concluded that this was also not a person living in the woods –

Jared: Because the area was just too wet and too inhospitable.

Reporter: And that’s why you called it a bog monster?

Jared: It was a goofy name, but it stuck.

Reporter: Who came up with this nickname?

Jared: Brett Densch did.

You came up with the name? Not so. Sure, it was you who put the name to this hypothetical woods dweller. But to get to the root of this name we need to go back a good decade further, to the day you were born, a day on which your mother and I looked at each other differently and saw in each other's eyes: "This is not the place and not the way to raise a kid." We were living in Phoenix at the time – actually in Mesa, and we were both working in the city. Your mother stopped working for a year or so, but our monetary needs brought her back into the job market and you into a childcare home. You didn't complain, but your behavior changed in ways that we didn't like, a kind of diffidence toward your parents, a fixation on other kids and your caregiver, as if you were punishing us. It may have been that you were happy in a shared environment, but we felt it was time to simplify our lives.

Your mother and I also hoped that a change in environment might change some negative dynamics between us. So we both put out feelers on family-friendly locations, and the "triangle" (Chapel Hill – Durham – Raleigh) came up high on the list. We hoped to move to Portland, Oregon, but I didn't get a nibble, let alone a job, so Doreen deferred and we moved to Chapel Hill on the strength of my job and a few possibilities for her. It took her a while, but she was able to find a part-time position and a part-time child-care situation for you. Still, the transition felt like a big win: daily commutes measured in minutes; twice the house and lawn; clean air and two-lane country roads; a community of college professors and biology PhDs, with equally smart and engaging kids; enough rain and greenery to soak out fifteen years of living in the desert.

We've visited Phoenix since, but you won't remember what it's like living there. Desert living these days is something unto itself, maybe comparable to living in Alaska in winter. During the inhospitable season, you live inside, moving from one man-made space to another, and you venture out experimentally, warily. Chapel Hill is more the kind of place that you *inhabit* – wet when it rains, sweaty when it boils, exhilarated on Carolina-blue days, disgusted in summer nights by the arthropodal abundance under electric lights, mesmerized when the cicadas echo from the trees like a permanent parade. We lived through one extended Carolina ice storm, when power was out for days, and a single fireplace served as a substitute for central heating. We felt like pioneers, camped out in their drafty first-generation cabins. Fortunately, that was in our first few years, when the cold was still a novelty.

We were here five years when I first tried the phrase on you. For exercise, I had adopted hiking – on trails in Chapel Hill, through the roads and paths of the Duke Forest, and around the few state parks – and your fate was to give me a reason and justification. You didn't appreciate the walking, but mostly you complained about being in the woods. I thought that you'd internalized a Brothers Grimm fear of treed areas, but Doreen said: "He doesn't like bugs any more than I do." I thought I could do what I usually do, which nerves Doreen and never sat very well with you: make a big joke out of it.

"I forgot to tell you, Brett, I guess I should explain now," I said one day as we walked along the creek trail from MLK Blvd to the Community Center. "There is something you should know. It's – well, it's an old legend I'm sure. But they tell of an ancient creature in these woods." I stopped talking and looked at you to make sure you understood the joke. "Something that lives here in the bogs. Do you know what they call it?"

You answered non-committally: "No."

"The Bog Monster of Bolin Creek, of course."

"Really?" you asked, raising your voice and looking at me.

"That's the legend," I said.

"Really?" you asked. "Really, daddy?"

"Really, that's the legend, or really, is there a bog monster?"

You were unable to respond, so I said, "That's the legend. But there are no bog monsters. Do you see a bog monster here?"

"No," you said, looking around.

"Neither do I. Maybe there's nothing to be afraid of...?"

You didn't answer, but after a few moments you got on the balls of your feet, ran ahead and stopped at a bend in the trail to wait for me. Oops, I thought, this didn't go right. I resolved to repeat it until you got so sick of the notion that you'd lose any reaction to it. When Doreen picked up on this, she had a heyday explaining to me why this kind of irony is lost on children and asking what was I thinking, and finally pleading: Could I leave her only child alone with my pretzel psychology?

You and I never did work out what a bog monster would look like, but pretty soon we were discussing it like a bad children's book – “daddy, I told you that's a silly story” – not exactly the fear tamer I had hoped for, but it lost its lightning-rod status. After a year or so we forgot all about it. More years passed before you developed into the young man I know now, and when you did, you discovered, as the young are wont to do, that you had unexpected talents. This one was cartoon drawing. One fine summer day Doreen brought you home from cartoon camp and later that evening put a drawing under my nose. “Six years, and he's still afraid; thanks a lot, John.” There it was, reminiscent of Yeti or Big Foot but with a Fort Bragg crew cut and appropriately short fur, labeled: “The Man-eating Bog Monster of Chapel Hill and Carrboro.” It smiled a big carnivorous smile, with an oversized blood drop hanging from one incisor, and had large anime eyes. That was the only time you drew it, at least as far as I know, and I got the impression that you drew it as part of an assignment rather than any eruption of suppressed childhood angst, but I didn't ask you, in case the question itself would circulate and keep the unpleasantness in front of us. I think I may have thrown out the drawing.

When that afternoon the four of you put your heads together, you saw the obvious zone of activity, along the course of Bolin and Booker creeks from the heights to the west, down to the Estes flats, where they come together at Little Creek; there were signs of a retreat over time, the only consistency being a series of acts that implied a prehensile and skilled set of appendages. You didn't know what this indicated, and retreated to the notion of ambulatory bandits (“What,” I asked, “a lost tribe of marauding Native Americans?”). You all feared you had nothing in your hands.

“Don't despair,” I said, “let's take another look at your data. Maybe there's a pattern we're missing.” One of you, maybe Billy, proposed that maybe it *was* Indians, using deer trails. “Or some other animal,” said Jared. “Maybe it's a bear?”

“Now you're talking,” I said.

“There aren't any bears around here,” replied Frank, morosely.

“Any more,” I finished. I was afraid at that point that you would all lose your nerve and want to start over, the one thing I couldn't stomach. An improbable but intriguing result seemed more than good enough for Mr. McGrath's daft assignment.

“Okay,” Billy said, “let's go with a bear.” Right, you all said, at least for the next few minutes, but then, as you were breaking up, Frank spat out: “We're going to have to change. A bear leaves scat, and Mr. McGrath won't accept it if we say one was hiding around here and no one saw the signs. We're going to have to go with a panther. It must bury its poop, like a cat.” Great, I thought, a stealthy and clever bear is one thing; a great cat wandering up and down our creek without anyone the wiser seemed to push the limits of possibility. But at least no one threw up his arms.

Some mornings later, the day the assignment was due, I heard from you during your breakfast (head in a bowl of cereal, comics laid out beside you), that discussions with Jared's dad had produced a new result: “He said the blotter crimes had to be persons, a group of people living somewhere along the creek.” “So you're giving up on the animal angle? It's all people?” “I guess so,” you said, slurping and munching. Okay, I thought, as long as the assignment goes in.

It did, and we went on with our lives. The next stage is the key. How did everything go awry? Who framed this as news? How in the world did a press release come out about an assignment by a group of middle-schoolers? Who put the tail to the donkey, or more precisely, to the bog monster? When did you say it, Brett?

It's too easy to mix things up in your memory, so I've asked questions of everyone I thought I could, and perused all the clip-outs and digital archives I could bring together. Facts: The assignment as turned in doesn't mention a monster of any kind. A news release from the school district appearing three weeks later stipulated that no students turned in an assignment about a fictional creature. Mr. McGrath was never quoted in the press and so could not say anything about a monster, but the district's press release stated he was pleased with the assignment and its fundamental scientific soundness. According to the same release, the students speculated that, despite a large range reminiscent of a top predator and a carnivorous MO (mostly: creating access to prey of various kinds), a ring of human thieves were probably involved. This was not what was assigned, but represented a good effort and an honest result.

The first mention in the press appeared in the *Chapel Hill Reporter* a month after the assignment was turned in. No one ever admitted to seeding the story, and the reporter who filed it seems to have disappeared – whether up or down the journalistic food chain, I don't know. I do know that the reporter was at a school board meeting three evenings before the Sunday edition that carried the story, and that the reporter was seen laughing with a member of the board. That board member was known to be friends with Jared's parents.

When did you say it? You couldn't tell me exactly when, although you affirmed when I asked if you did: "I guess so." It must have been an offhanded joke – 'my dad used to talk about a bog monster.' Wistful? Were you still angry with me, the perpetrator of an ill-conceived fairy tale? Was it anything other than an innocent recollection? Not rancorous? Certainly fateful. I read somewhere that fate is what happens when you stop at a port of call not in your itinerary. When that happens, the unexpected becomes the destination and you little more than a passenger.

Here's the *Reporter* story:

Headline: Local Students Uncover Historical 'Monster'

Subheader: GIS and police data suggest creature's range and activity

A local group of middle school students uncovered a pattern in 50 years of yellowing police blotters as old as a hundred years ago, gathered from Orange county newspapers, that indicates a large carnivorous animal stalked outlying areas now incorporated into Chapel Hill and Carrboro. The pattern emerged when the data was coded and entered into the county's GIS system with the help of system administrator John Densch, whose son is one of the student researchers.

Spokesman Jared Brightman explained at an impromptu press conference in his parents' home that the students had initially reached an opposite conclusion. "We thought it was a band of thieves," he said. His father, police detective Ferguson Brightman, affirmed this interpretation: "I still don't know what else it could be."

"It wasn't until later," the younger Brightman said, "that we realized that this was an unsatisfactory explanation." He displayed a large map depicting the beds of Booker Creek through northern Chapel Hill and Bolin Creek from outside Carrboro to their confluence, with stars to indicate incidents. The map also indicated historical roads and trails and original areas of wetlands. "This map shows how unlikely it would be for humans to navigate among these sites, except by road. And if these acts were carried out by humans on roads, why would they go to the trouble of doing this just in the creek areas?"

Then Brightman put up a poster with a selected list of events. "Chicken coop broken into, three chickens taken, four left. Dog maimed. Garbage contents upset and spread around lawn; rib bones taken. Pond fish taken. Locked freezer in carport damaged during attempted break-in. Window over kitchen sink broken, no bird, rock or other cause found. These and many other events are inconsistent with human activity, which would show different ways to maximize the reward for the risk. These random occurrences are more like the acts of a roaming animal, necessarily a large animal."

When asked what kind of animal, Brightman responded that they were still unsure, but they had a name for it: ‘The Bog Monster of Booker Creek.’ He attributed this whimsical name to his fellow researcher, Brett Densch, the son of John Densch, pointing out that the family resides near the Cedar Forks tributary of Booker Creek. At press time there was no comment forthcoming from the Chapel Hill or Carrboro police departments about the students’ investigatory work.

– Yes. I gave Jared the map. I gave him the argument against human activity. I provided him with the perfect opportunity to mix it all together and make a mockery of us. I don’t know why. I was upset, I guess, that you had all taken Jared’s dad’s advice over mine. I was showing off. I couldn’t imagine it would have the slightest consequence. My mind was elsewhere.

We all had a yuck about the *Reporter* article, though, as I said, the school district did go to the trouble of issuing a disclaimer. A day or two after the press release, I got a call at work from a reporter claiming to work for the Associated Press. Okay, I thought, I’ll bite. “Sure, I can answer a few questions.” It turned out that he had already interviewed Jared and wanted to know my reaction to a few statements that seemed more than a bit provocative about those peculiar Denschs. He wanted to speak with you. “Absolutely not,” I said, not knowing that you yourself had already given an in-person interview to the *Reporter* reporter, now writing for the regional paper. The story had gone out on the wire? I was nonplussed. It was being played as local interest throughout the southeast? In the “wacky news” bin nationally? Being prepped for morning radio shows and morning weather anchors...

I wanted to call Doreen right away, but maybe you’ll understand my hesitation. ‘Bog monster?! Now you’re humiliating him in the national media?! Why you are so destructive with your own lifeblood, I’ll never understand, John. Never.’

I was nervous about going home, but when I did, it was without incident. We had a couple more days before it all blew up.

At one time, there were thousands of acres of bog in North Carolina. I wouldn’t have been able to tell you that. I assumed that a bog was a northern cranberry- or peat-growing watery wasteland. I wouldn’t have been able to tell you that bogs are a common natural feature at various altitudes and latitudes, one of many contradictions in the distribution of water around this world. The Chapel Hill area probably did once have its share of Piedmont bog land, although our GIS maps will only show you the designation “wetlands,” and these are now mostly wannabe reconstructions standing in for natural features that we’ve destroyed. At least Bolin and Booker still run free, except where they disappear into concrete tunnels beneath the University and Eastgate malls, only to emerge free and mostly unsullied – the Booker dramatically from beneath the local Burger King.

I’ve walked most of the length of these old creeks and found surprising room for a bog monster to stretch out in the muck. If you trace the Bolin out to Lake Hogan Farms, you can even begin to imagine an untamed, dark, and forested time, in those few minutes from when you leave one subdivision behind and before you see the next.

I can almost hear you say, ‘You can’t follow these creeks. They pass through private property almost the whole way. Now you’re just crapping me.’

Brett, you’d be right, mostly. That brings me to an admission I hadn’t planned on making, but this narrative seems to have taken on a life of its own. There may be no one alive who has seen more of this county than I have. Think about this. Delivery people, police, handy men, they all travel from one end of the county to the other – but they never get far from roads and driveways. What if I told you if easily 50% of the county is more than 100 meters from a road? Maybe 20% more than 1000 meters from any public road? Who knows what’s there? The landowner, sometimes. The hunters he or she rents to. The farm workers. Otherwise, the occasional agent from a timber company interested in buying a tall tree stand.

And me. If you had walked over to my car at the time and opened the trunk, you could have found – after some shuffling – a reflective county safety vest marked “Surveyor” and a big, industrial looking GPS unit. I used these on random afternoons, when I couldn’t stand the office any more or when I’d leave work a bit early, or what have you, to find an undiscovered corner of the county. Usually I consulted a random number generator to grab coordinates from the GIS map, figured out the best way to approach the location, and drove straight there. It was a compulsion, I guess. It had begun a few years before as an innocent game, but sometimes the urge to get out left me completely unable to concentrate – and I just had to go.

When this first blew up, I started to walk these creeks systematically. I had to be cautious, of course. It’s one thing for a salt-rock-shotgun-toting farmer to find me pacing off his hay field, it’s quite another for a father to find me walking behind the family house, for all the world an unpredictable stalker. Eventually I walked the whole lot of them – Booker Creek, Cedar Fork, Bolin Creek, Little Creek, even down to Mill Creek off of University Lake. There’s not a lot now that would count as a bog or even a true wetland, but enough to give you a feel. All these things we call lakes now – Elizabeth, Eastwood, University – they may well have been good bog candidates, way back when, maybe in between dammings by beavers and humans.

One morning, you were more morose than usual and when I made a point of it Doreen glanced at me with that “you lunkhead” look. “I’m fine,” you said. After you went upstairs, she said quietly: “There’s a love interest.” Made perfect sense, but it also made me feel useless. Despite all the hard lessons I’ve had to swallow, I wouldn’t take my own counsel. Sure, I can give you the statistics on, and try to steer you from, self-destructive behavior, but otherwise my perspective is too clouded by my own unplanned life. And even if I somehow felt justified to do so, could I really tell you something about love that you won’t have to learn on your own person?

I never thought much of words like “passion” and “love” because they make it seem like this thing comes from the mind. Not that I’m arguing that “raging hormones” and “lust” are a good substitute for what we feel. It’s the intersection that gets us: a physiological state that leaves a deep and broad sense of lack – and, every once in a while, settles on a mental picture of its completion, in a feedback loop that heightens every sensation, every slight, every hope. It’s an unsustainable disequilibrium that cannot be explained as desire itself, but that sometimes finds its object of desire.

Here’s the thing about living this long. I’m 42 years old and – although my life has nothing in common with that of the skinny young man I once was – I’m still him. Sure, the humor has changed, at least beyond the need to protect myself with a quick joke. The impassioned and longing young man has become the impatient and distracted husband. The infinite potential has become a comfortable technocrat. The existentialist a realist. The sworn opponent of the failed nuclear family an uncertain and angry father. You get the picture.

But I am still there with that young man. Even as I sit here quietly at a desk, or sometimes when I sit on my car hood in the middle of nowhere, North Carolina, I can feel my way back, as if all the changes are incidental and the core are these few events, which feel as real to me as the day they happened, no matter how much they lose in fidelity. It’s as if I’m stretching a latex sheet back through a dimensionally folded distance into the past, and I’m sitting there as the young me. Details are few, but the reality is undeniable – a continuity I’ve felt for the last twenty-five years.

At the same time, the sheet is impermeable. I cannot interact; I cannot change a thing, employ my experience or benefit from hindsight. The girl will never look at me, or lean over to kiss me, always just that painfully un-self-aware young man, painted onto the other side of the sheet. The answers never change, the mistakes never get undone. The beautiful moments and the horrible ones, together. Take my advice or not – I’m not sure anyone’s advice can help you, for however much I or others stretch back

and forward in time. It hasn't helped me. Just don't be surprised when, later in life, you find yourself identifying more with the helpless teenager than the person you've built of yourself.

The TV truck was waiting at Phillips Middle School: lots of good background shots there, enough woods to convey the mood, and a small creek if water were desired. Jared was on tap for a national interview before school began. We didn't know a thing because we don't watch morning television. Off you went to school, backpack, trumpet case and lunchbox in hand, like a sheep to the slaughter.

I can imagine you on the bus, unhappy and still sleepy, a tickle of longing in the back of your brain, looking out the bus windows, unable to fix your mind on anything until the very last minute, when you feel the tensing before the school day, at the moment you see the school parking lot open up before you. You observe a white truck where there should only be mustard-yellow buses, a large truck that slowly resolves into a television broadcasting truck from the local arm of a national network. You sense why it's there, but it seems too unreal to accept. The whole world, after all, doesn't revolve around you. You're just a middle-school cog in an education machine, a boy on a bus like hundreds of thousands of others, an awkward 8th grader indistinguishable from any other, seeing only his worst self-image. If there is someone special here – she, whoever she is, only she is indecipherably more.

The front doors flap open, and you wait your turn, force your way into the aisle at the necessary moment, then jump down the steps onto the asphalt. You look back over your shoulder at the truck, a huge antenna arm extended skyward, a generator chugging away. Still wondering, you pass into the building like hundreds of times before.

Your first class is what, math? You are sitting in the class for 15-20 minutes before the distorting intercom activates. The principal's voice itself comes on. "Mrs. Winchfield... Mrs. Winchfield, would you please send Brett Densch to the office? Brett Densch. Thank you so much." A click off.

You look up at the box in disbelief, or maybe you have already played through the possibility so much that you show no surprise. In either case, a series of moments pass, during which your teacher and your fellow students process the message and speculate in their own minds why you are being summoned, sometimes with a mental "tsk" or "ooh." You get up and wonder if you should bring your books, but Mrs. Winchfield indicates with a small wag of her head that, no, you should assume that you'll be right back: Always assume you'll be right back, unless you are given to understand otherwise.

The walk to the office just builds the tension, and you have to slow your steps as you approach the office. You turn the corner and there he is: the early-twenties production assistant, with the headset with mic, the clipboard and a harried expression. Or maybe it isn't so hackneyed, but you are introduced to the staffer, who tells you that you should be congratulated for making such an impression at an early age, that this is a unique opportunity, enviable but, more importantly, your chance to be a participant in modern American culture. This kind of opportunity may only come once in a lifetime, you know?

You come around, or you wonder how you can say no, or you wish someone could decide for you. "You just need to call your parents," he says, handing you a cell phone with your home number keyed up. Doreen picks up, because she happens to be home. "On television? What?" she says. You explain in half sentences, then: "Never mind." You hand the phone back to the assistant as if to say this is now officially over. But he continues the conversation in glowing terms with your mother, who is the picture of disbelief, temporarily, before the realization hits her that this all stems from that one ill-conceived joke. She throws up her hands. "I suppose his father is there. If this is really what he wants to do to his only child." "It's fine then?" the attendant asks, with his digital recorder up to the earpiece. "Just great," she says and hangs up.

You are shuttled outside to where the small crowd of onlookers and the equally crowding TV crew have encircled the interviewer. He is perched on a director's chair, with an empty chair beside him. You probably don't recognize the man, but his face is better known among the great slew of Americans than

all but a few politico faces. His shtick is weather, but his role is the easy, informal and wacky interview. “You’re going to be great,” the assistant says. “Just be sure to speak up for the microphones, okay?”

After you’ve been seated next to the weatherman, who peers up for just a moment from his assistant’s notes to squint at you and then briefly smile, you wait. A considerable time rolls by, with no one paying a wit’s attention to you, until you hear a voice from somewhere behind the camera: “One minute.” “Okay,” the host says to himself, and he looks at you and smiles. “Hi,” looks down, “Brett.” Looks up. “I am so-and-so. I’m going to ask you a few questions about this story. I’m going to ask you how you came up with the name, and why you think there’s a monster in the woods around Chapel Hill. How does that sound?” “Fine,” you may say.

Once the lights come on and the camera operator gets very serious, there are only a few seconds until the producer points at the weatherman. “We’re back in Chapel Hill...” The rest blurs in your mind, until the man shifts a little forward in his chair and half turns toward you. “With me outside Guy B. Phillips Middle School is Brett Demsch, the young man who is credited with helping to identify and name Chapel Hill’s answer to Sasquatch. Brett, how are you this morning?” “Fine,” you say, quickly, defensively. Not an auspicious start.

“Great,” he says as he looks down. “Brett, tell me, how did you and your schoolmates decide that a Bigfoot has been stalking Chapel Hill?”

You look at him, a bit astonished, every bit the young teenager aghast at another incomprehensible twist in adult logic. “We didn’t say Bigfoot – ”

“Right! – So, how did you come up with the name ‘bog monster.’ That seems a bit more appropriate for Connecticut, my home state, or maybe New Hampshire. Are there bogs in North Carolina?”

“I don’t know,” you say, and let the first question rest.

“Then why ‘bog monster’?”

“My dad – ” you say, but don’t know how to finish that thought in a sentence. I understand why, believe me, as I keep writing.

On television, a graphic of three ‘conclusions’ touted by Jared replaces the speakers, during which a signal to the interviewer must have indicated, let’s cut this short. “Your dad coined the phrase? He helped you map out the territory of the bog monster, didn’t he?”

“Yeah,” you say, again with a pregnant pause that shows you want to fill it with the truth, but the interviewer finishes: “All right, I appreciate your coming out this morning to share this with us. What class do you have right now?”

“I’m not sure,” you say, looking over your shoulder at the school, as if it could answer you (good for a laugh in 60% of viewer homes).

“All right, Brett, you get to your next class. Back to you, guys....” He waits motionless and smiling some seconds for the signal, and when it comes he relaxes his spine and takes off the mic as a surgeon might doff plastic gloves. He doesn’t turn back to you, Brett, at all, and the production assistant moves you away from the impromptu set and back to the school entrance.

That evening was hard. It began with Doreen’s and my muted greeting of each other – our eyes seemed to have the same magnetic pole and couldn’t catch each other without diverting. Doreen moved with the motions of someone in soaked clothing – soaked in disappointment. I walked the way you might to say, “This downpour isn’t so bad.” You, Brett, had homework and didn’t stay long at the table. We were left sitting beside each other, chewing slowly, unable to speak. Not that this was new, and in a strange way this was already better than where we’d been many times before.

You deserve to understand. Imagine you and your friends at a table, at lunch, laughing the way friends do – not exactly un-self-consciously but with such practice and repetition that it becomes easy, routine, comforting. Then this kid you know – son of a circus geek or an inveterate nerd or someone who stinks or just the kid with the crossed eyes, decide for yourself – comes to you and says, “Brett, can

you come over to my house this afternoon?” You (thirteen again) look at him incredulously. “No,” you say with half a laugh and a look at your buddies. What was he thinking? But imagine he keeps asking, day after day, until you don’t answer any more, you just glare and let that silence wrap around his ears, weigh down his shoulders and keep him locked in place, while you just walk away.

Doreen and I have been silent with each other that way. If you can hate a stranger who imposes himself for just a few seconds a day on your space and your mind, imagine someone whom you love, who seems to say the same kinds of nonsense and with the same indifference to your answers and your feelings and your sense of what’s right, until you don’t speak any more, you glare and let silence whoosh in with a great big icy vapor cloud of contempt, until you are both spitting it back out with half a breath and freezing out everything you share.

There we sat at the dinner and couldn’t begin to talk, couldn’t look at each other, and yet we couldn’t walk away. We were both angry and that was a relief in its own way. You don’t argue out of contempt, although you can stop any argument that way. No, if you argue and shout, it’s because you want something from your opposite, and as unreasonable, insulting, impossible or selfish as it may be – it’s still something that holds you together.

Doreen finally broke the silence. “So, John, I got to see your son on national TV this morning. Anne gave me a copy, in case you’d like to see it. But then I suppose you were there.” She held her words and her breath, her cheeks draining of color as she looked at me. Unwatched, her fork lazily collected spaghetti on her plate.

“I wasn’t,” I replied, “but I heard about it. I can’t believe they put him on without our permission. George recommended that I sue.”

She dropped her fork with a clatter and looked at me. “Are you saying you weren’t there? They said you were. But don’t try to put this on anyone else. You’re the one who started this, you kept it alive at every turn, and now, along with your being likened to the village idiot” – ouch! – “your son was absolutely humiliated before a national television audience while trying to defend you.”

“Now wait a second,” I shot back. Then like a shark smelling blood: “*You* gave them permission to do the interview?”

“I told them that if you *wanted* him to talk to them,” she said, “I wasn’t going to stop you.”

“Where *the hell* did you get the idea that I wanted them to talk to him?” I shouted. “I’ve turned down every interview request.”

“Don’t curse at me, John.” Then back on message: “This whole thing is because you cannot be straightforward with your own child. You’re always playing out these jokes, hiding behind them. Your son doesn’t even know who you are.”

“He doesn’t, or you don’t?” I asked, still with an edge on my voice. Attack prevarication.

“Ha,” she said with no humor. “I’ve given up.” Pause. “But I’ve been trying to get you to participate in raising your son, and all I see from you is a constant tearing down.”

“Wait a second –” I said, putting up a stop sign in my mind.

“It’s not just this,” she said. “This is bad – very bad – but it will pass. What I am worried about is how you fail to connect with your son. You don’t play with him; you don’t share any hobbies with him; you don’t share anything about yourself. You show up late for dinner, then you sit in front of the TV or that computer, and you live in your own little universe, no matter how much your family tries to bring you out.” A sigh.

“Doreen,” I said firmly, as if her name would bring her back from this brinkmanship.

“Doreen, *Doreen*, can’t you do any better? Doesn’t something occur to you? Isn’t there anything you can contribute to this discussion?”

“What am I supposed to say?” I said. “Gosh, Doreen, your analysis is perfect again. It’s all my fault. I should just shrivel up and die. Thanks for letting me know.”

She looked away and sighed again. “I don’t know why I even bother. You can’t ever seem to get beyond your own little ego problems. Fine. I don’t want to know anything about you. Just share something with your son beyond the fact that you imagine monsters behind every rock, okay?”

I looked at her incredulously. She got up and went to the kitchen. The storm seemed to have passed, and maybe the sun would come out, I couldn’t tell, but regardless we were both shivering wet.

The experts – a phalanx of them – emerged from God knows where. A biologist specializing in urban fauna. A statistician with an advanced degree in geography. The columnist with no patience for hoaxes. The science teacher with his own TV show. A former police chief. The cultural literacy specialist. A former chicken coop thief. The Bigfoot debunker. A muckraking reporter. The “shame-on-you” plain-talking parent activist. A local politician. They mostly took this opportunity to pontificate about the irresponsible way I fooled you and your friends, and then the unforgivable way that I let you advocate for me and my cheap publicity stunt; a few thought you were the adolescent criminal genius and I your patsy.

You, Brett, seemed unaffected, that is, no more morose than before, for which I was very grateful. I found my hands shaking just a little bit more; my sleep a bit shorter; and distractions all the more important. I sat in front of the TV one evening after another, and watched more B movies than I’d like to admit. I watched until I was sick of them and their mechanically predictable plots, so much that a single question came up again and again: Just how many B writers are there, just how many imaginations flow like a vortex around that drain...?

You won’t know this about me, Brett, but I once thought about being a writer. That may explain why this missive won’t stop growing, though more to the point is my prolixity at memo writing. I can write them at a clip, and my colleagues tend to pass the assignment to me whenever they can. My emails can be quite the production, too, with the result that my supervisor has more than once phoned me to get the one-minute version.

As a writer, I have a B sensibility myself, with a predilection for the grandiose storylines of science fiction – so believe me, I am not disparaging those who make formulaic, half-baked movies. But you can only chew through so many of them before the inconsistencies and conventions itch inside your brain no differently than the tension that you’re trying to escape....

After many such evenings, I started unpacking from my memory old stories that I had told myself, recreating an internal life that I had had many years earlier. I had thought many times about getting them down on paper, and started more than once. The elation lasts for a few days as words flow and ideas take form, then you find yourself before a problem, a scene that doesn’t come into focus, and you let things lie, tell yourself you’re strengthening the plot in your mind. After several days you know you have to get back at it, but when you look at what you’ve written, you see nothing but trite phrasing and paragraphs of filler and plot-propping characters, and a storyline no different than a story you’ve seen four or five times before – and which has no doubt been told somewhere on this world hundreds of times before. Why go on? For someone like me, it’s so much easier to finish a memo.

The media hounds called our house for a few days, until they concluded I wasn’t going to talk to anyone, and the feeding frenzy went on in a whirlwind around my apparently cold, lifeless body. Doreen – it would be wrong to say that she reveled in my pain. I could see the struggle in her eyes and sometimes a stifled laugh, sometimes a swallowed sigh, often with an edge that said, this is *my* man to make fun of, not anyone else’s. I guess that’s a kind of protection, in the same way a man might want to put his arm around his little lady’s shoulders (though Doreen is at least as tall as me) and say, “Don’t worry your pretty little head about all that.”

I felt like I had hit bottom. No matter what they thought of my representation in the press, friends, colleagues and acquaintances all seemed to agree that I had brought this upon myself. “A smart aleck with an unpleasant tinge of arrogance,” I saw with a glance at an email that made Doreen guffaw. Much

as this irritated me, I couldn't contest it. Even you seemed to have had enough of me. I don't know if it was because you yourself were suffering. I didn't have that much access to your inner life; even the few moments of visible weakness – “a girl's involved” – seemed to have passed.

The transition came for me one morning when I opened to the local news in the newspaper and found a two-paragraph story with an inauspicious two-line headline: “Farm to host monster fest.” It described how a farm field along Bolin Creek – outside of Chapel Hill – had been leased for a weeklong summer festival celebrating the Bog Monster of recent fame. “The lessors are ‘The Southeast Sasquatch Society’ and the ‘Renaissance Fayres Group of the Piedmont.’” This was my chance to guffaw, spilling coffee all over the paper and half over me. I thought: something to distract everyone from my mistake. Sure, this would doubtless drag my name through the cow dung again, but I was pleased: there are people crazier than I.

I dried the page, and downloaded the story off their website. I could look Doreen in the eye after she read it. She laughed, too, but couldn't see any vindication for me in it.

She and I didn't talk much, and she went to bed most nights without checking in with me. I began to sit in front of the computer until late at night, and to write little chunks of the stories that were coming back to me. You were quiet, reclusive, impenetrable. Doreen opined: “Oh, there's a girl all right.” I felt I understood your impassiveness, but I can't say whether you felt any of the empathy from your parents.

One of my stories begins this way.

– A young man awoke slowly, feeling drugged or maybe weakened by long illness. His nerves reported back from throughout his body long before he could move any part – immobilized by sleep or drugs – and he was aware of sores in his skin, aching joints, closed eyelids that were gunked and dried shut. He slowly gained control of his muscles, and tried to move. It proved to be impossible, but not because he was confined or injured; his muscles either refused or were unable to respond. He forced his eyes open with a crackling sound, but film on the lenses left everything in a fog. After a long series of blinks one eye cleared, and he saw that he was surrounded by a soft light, emanating from all surfaces, floor included. The floor was a milk-white surface with a regular hash pattern every three feet of metallic-looking runners. The walls did not have any visible pattern, and seemed about two feet away from his head and again from his feet. The wall in front of his eye was ten to twelve feet away. The ceiling height was impossible to determine from this angle.

He became aware of spittle running out of his mouth in a rut, and simultaneously of a disconcerting feeling that his head had become indented where it lay on the floor. The room was warm – no, hot and extremely dry, like a sauna just before someone drops a ladle of water on the heating stones. He was naked, as he realized when his legs moved against each other. What he could feel of his skin was caked with dried sweat, and greasy at the joints.

Slowly, minutes or dozens of minutes later, he recovered some strength and began to lift himself, to move his shoulders to a better angle, to adjust his legs to assist. His head still wouldn't cooperate; it resisted as though it had grown to twice its normal size. His whole body seemed in rebellion. He didn't know why, and slowly but inexorably fell back into unconsciousness.

When he awoke again, the room was darker. It may have been cooler as well. He lay still for quite a while, trying to collect his thoughts. Where was he? A hospital? He could not remember where he had last been, but was fairly certain that he had gone to sleep in his own bed. He ran through memories, named his family and closest friends, to eliminate the possibility of global amnesia. Perhaps he was suffering from a traumatic occurrence that caused him to suppress the event and everything leading up to it. A hospital then.

Maybe he was being treated in a hyperbaric oxygen chamber. That calmed his nerves for a while, and put a number of questions to rest. Eventually, though, a thought came up that he could not dismiss and could not calmly reason away: what if he was dreaming? What if he were in a coma or otherwise

unable to awake? That could explain his emaciated self-image and the detail-poor environment that he found himself in, as well as his paralysis and the lack of memory. That was a frightening thought because of the immobility, one that led immediately to the image of agonizing, unremitting stillness and sameness, until he went mad or his body was allowed to die. As he lay there, still and breathing laboriously in and out, the word “death” began to sound in his mind like “release.”

A long time passed, during which the room got darker. He tried to control his mind, with panic at the edges. He almost missed the change: near his feet a rectangle frame appeared in the wall, and a door moved inward. From the near darkness of the uncovered space emerged a circular body, held upright on four arms and hands and topped with two cockroach-style antennae and two extra hands holding a small plate. The hands lowered and then let drop the plate. The apparition retreated and the door closed. Some kind of giant bug had just brought him a meal.

The young man had plenty of time to contemplate this, even after he slept again. The room was getting brighter again, a circadian cycle. The plate contained something shimmery like slime, perhaps food, or rather his mind’s twisted reconstruction of hospital food, while the bug had to be a hospital aide. Did that mean he was up and about, able to chew, just encapsulated in insanity? Or was he gravity-welled on a bed, in a hospital that his comatose mind was unable to perceive? The answer to this question had many implications, but the issue was at the moment undecidable. For a long time he debated whether to take the bait –the slimy goo – but in the end, he decided he had to.

He realized that brute force was not going to get his head where he needed it, so he tested his limbs for their positioning and purchase against the floor. Grease from his body made things more difficult. Eventually, he mastered a shallow roll of his head together with a wave movement of his body. After innumerable repetitions he had half turned himself toward the plate. He stretched his lower left arm out and with some rolls and reps he felt the plate between his fingers. It felt like plastic but was as heavy as lead. He got close enough to use his thumb and pulled the plate a little toward him.

His fingers then explored the stuff on the plate. It felt organic enough, so he squished some into his palm and dragged his hand back to his body, lifted the forearm and deposited the sticky fingers and payload in his mouth. He chewed slowly. A light, foamy consistency, but nothing like the taste of food, neither a spice nor oil nor the distinctive odor of a particular vegetable or meat. It was the definition of bland, though it went down fine.

When his hand was back at the plate, he flicked his finger at the plate, which clanged no differently than a polymer would, but with no movement. Extra gravity? he thought in a moment of realization. He dropped his arm against the floor; the whack ached. Effect of insanity, or the paling of life in a dying body?

Or reality? ventured a small internal voice he didn’t recognize as his own.

He let the bug memory fade – if it did not repeat it was an anomaly that should not detract from his body’s real condition. He noted that he had no urge to urinate or defecate. Was that thirst in his throat, or a coating from the food? Maybe what he swallowed was soap? Or some poison?

After a while, he felt something in his stomach. A lump, as if what he had eaten had coagulated and hardened and was now bloating him. The bloating feeling slowly gave way to the loss of sensation, freezing his muscles from the inside out, taking with it his nerves and sensations, first where they are scarce and vague, then in his limbs and appendages. The last bit to tingle and fade were his mouth and eyes. He was both afraid and expectant, hoping death here would mean rebirth there, where he was really alive. Goodbye – see you on the other side – he said to his body, as his eyes went black.

Doreen, your mother, doesn’t think much of my science fiction affinities. I know you don’t either, though the reasons differ. You prefer adventure where the frame is more real, the stakes realistic, and the hero’s improbable success an all-the-more stark contradiction. Doreen reads psychological novels, self-help and spiritual tracts, and finds science fiction an empty evasion. “Empty, no,” I reply.

Your mother has a psychology degree, which she uses more or less daily in her administrative role in human resources at Blue Cross. You still marvel at the reflective, wedge-shaped building off highway 15-501, looking more like a gigantic sculpture than a building. I find the building as interesting and bothersome as any trompe l'oeil, the kind of thing that engages you on first sight, makes you stop and think, makes you want others to stop and look, too; you feel all the more sheepish when you find yourself entering the building without another thought – the first impression abandoned for common sense.

Your mother was just starting her career when we met. I don't know what it was that made us stick to each other, actually. I guess we were both desperate to find something that worked in our lives, and we functioned together. Don't get me wrong – your mother and I love each other, and we're working on loving each other more. But if we had been on different trajectories, it's hard to believe we would not have just bumped off each other. That's part of the disappointment, part of the baggage that we bring. Soul mates? More fellow travelers, I'm afraid, and that always makes you nervous – the uncanny sense that you may be heading to different destinations and that your paths will diverge unexpectedly.

Let me see if I can describe to you the woman I had met. She was in her early twenties. She smiled a lot more then, and the smile had a way of animating her face in ways you may not recognize: a young woman, confident, enjoying life, sure of her friends, innocent even. I was a lot quieter and maybe not so ready to laugh or smile, but I could sit in a corner and watch her and her friends enjoy themselves for hours, which I more or less did on more than one of the occasions that brought us together. Eventually she noticed, and there were two possible reactions – either freak-out or curiosity. She freaked.

I didn't see her for a few years, then one day we crossed paths again. She seemed changed, and in fact was, in the wake of a very painful betrayal by a boyfriend. She had mostly forgotten why I had stood out, but remembered that I had had something for her. We went out, first to console her ego and, I suppose, as a reward for me. After we dated for a number of months, we found our lives intertwining, and we drew the consequence: we became engaged. A few weeks later she was pictured as bride-to-be in her parents' local paper, though no date was set.

When I married Doreen, she was a serious woman, someone who understood the consequences of marriage, household, offspring and life together only too well. She had long since remembered everything about us. She tended to wear austere clothing, mostly pantsuits, with a hint of eau and mascara, and she pinned her hair back much of the time. She acted as if in training for something; her face grew taut, while its wrinkles seemed more pronounced, neither of which helped her narrow head and long nose, although her mottled blue eyes did well under this treatment. Tall and thin, she was attractive as a woman, but with a hint of abstinence or illness in her silhouette.

Having a child changed her a lot – she lost the thinness, filled out her face, and became more relaxed, lethargic even, as if something had been decided with your birth. That's a mistake I've made several times. Nothing is decided for good – if it matters at all it'll be tested again and again, no matter how certain you are of your choice. Having a child is the perfect example, a decision that comes back again and again for reaffirmation. Brett, even if I don't always shout my joy, I want you to know that you were never just one decision, but always the best I ever made.

So – Doreen became your mother. She had some hard times, and I think you know this. What you may not know – but deserve to, when you're 25 – is that your mother experienced real depression when you were young. It was hard for me to watch. She was effusive and elated one day, reemerging as the young woman I had first met; then depressed and withdrawn, sometimes barely able to get out of bed, and suspicious of almost everything I did. Prescriptions pulled her through. I don't know what she thought of me at the time. I know I'm no perfect husband. Right now, I should be upstairs, with her, thinking this through with her, but I'm sitting here, communicating with a mature son who doesn't exist yet. Who may never read this.

The lights were down, way down. The young man opened his eyes aware that something had changed. Where was he? He looked a long time before his mind admitted that his eyes saw the same indistinct walls and hashed floor as before. But something had changed. He contemplated how to best move his body. Just before he began to work it, something passed over his eyes: at first it was just a dark rush, but he eventually recognized small limbs jutting from a disc that looked like a headless sea turtle. It stopped over him. He saw tall stalks extending out the upper side, waving slightly as if in a wind, and near the mouth two glints that slowly resolved into large, black, reflective globules, glossy like irises. Eyes.

The young man screamed with the half lungs he could fill. The disc reacted immediately, moved noisily backwards on four larger limbs – not the small appendages to either side of the semi-globes – that were jointed like a lizard's. Two massive hooks opened like mandibles, and revealed something hideously like an ant's mouth. From deep within resonated clicks, buzzes, whoops and thuds, perhaps its own scream.

The stalks were atop the facial area and looked like antennae twitching in rhythm – although a slight arrhythmia worked its way in. They were maybe the length of the disc. The body measured 3 feet in diameter, perhaps a foot deep and another foot off the floor. Like the main appendages, it was brown and grayed, leathery, slightly haired. The antennae gleamed like plastic or obsidian. The little arms were black and dark, similar to the inside of the mouth. The eyes, shiny as a billiard ball, stared without blinking.

When the young man had emptied his lungs twice, he had to stop. The clicks and buzzing also receded. They were both faced with a fight-or-flight situation. He was theoretically armed with long legs and arms, fists and a large well-protected brain. The creature was, on the other hand, not just hypothetically mobile and obviously much stronger. It also had the presumed advantage of understanding the situation, whether nightmare or delusion or twisted reality. The young man tried to assess his ability to gather strength into a single act of desperation, but he hoped and thought it wouldn't come to that. If aggression was intended, there had been plenty of opportunities to pull his appendages from their sockets as he slept.

He began to discern that some clicks and whoops did not come from the bug creature before him. Strategizing. The bug began to go backwards and a section of wall opened into darkness. The creature disappeared and the door shut.

For a long time, the young man gathered his breath and wits. The lights seemed to be intensifying. All of a sudden he heard an electromagnetic “whoomp” and felt the difference. To his surprise, his body was not naked. There was a full-length bodysuit, partially cut out, strangely airy and now suddenly steely as well. Bondage, then, he thought and decided to test it, not expecting any give. For an instant, there was no movement, then WHAM! He literally flew up into the air and landed with a bone-echoing crunch. His skull might have cracked, but he had what seemed like a thin helmet on it. Blood flowed in his mouth and he spat some out. Slowly now, he lifted his two arms, set his hands on the floor and lifted his upper body up with a jerk. His head flew back and forth until he flexed his neck and it stopped. He pushed up further and pulled a knee in, then the other. He raised his upper body. He was half standing, supported by an exoskeleton that responded to his every muscle movement. The exaggerated movements felt a bit like the sudden jerky movements of an insect, but he soon steadied himself. He stood up fully, a foot or so below the ceiling.

He could look down and get a sense of his body. His legs and arms looked thin but strong enough, while his chest was sunken and his fingers boney and weak – as if the main muscle groups had been worked, while other muscles had mostly atrophied. His skin was pale to translucent. The bend in his arms seemed punctuated by numberless dots – perhaps microinjections? After examining himself for a long while, he looked up and noticed that the door wall had lost its luminosity.

Behind the transparent wall he could discern six bug creatures. Two, including, he thought, the one from before, were seemingly on the ground, although the contours of the room were indistinct. The other four were apparently hovering – the edges of their personal aircraft were visible underneath the bodies of the higher two. The middle two had something in the concave area of their oblong bodies, something shiny and pointed in a way that reminded him of a weapon, slanted so that he assumed that one of their major limbs, now resting limply on foot guards, must have been double-jointed enough to reach up and over, grasp and bring to bear. The bug world equivalent of a gunslinger?

As he stood, he tried to find signs that this was an unreal experience – as it must be. But the typical flow and ebb of a dream was nowhere to be found. He counted the seconds, and nothing changed, except that the hovering bugs seemed to be moving up and down as if x-raying him in chunks. Maybe the antennas, he thought. That gave him a momentary ah-ha: evolution would never produce these freakish amalgams of bugs, leathery animals and primates, which had therefore to be products of his mind, perhaps unusually detailed and effective because his whole comatose brain was engaged in their creation. Let the antennas x-ray him.

The question was whether the coma dream was preventing him from reaching consciousness, or whether consciousness was out of the question. If the latter, then there was no cost in believing the former, while ignoring the former possibility was tantamount to suicide. But how to break the illusion, force his mind to consciousness?

“Who are you?” he asked the bugs behind the glass wall.

A few clicks and whoops followed. This approach wasn’t going to get him very far.

He took a single jerky step toward the wall, and it went opaque.

You don’t normally look me up, so forgive my surprise when you surfaced next to me and said, at the instant I saw you, “Can we go to the fair?” I was nonplussed. “Fair?” You seemed pained, incredulous and disturbed at the degree to which I was out of touch with the world. “The bog monster fair,” you let out.

I thought at first that you were joking – making fun of me, of course. I wanted to say that, but realized I ought not to shut down communication – all Doreen’s post-mortems weren’t without their effect – and so I said, with great parental matter-of-factness, “Oh, that fair. Are you sure it’s appropriate? Our family has had to suffer a great deal because of the press about the ‘bog monster;’ this might only aggravate things.”

“Oh come *on*, dad,” you said. “Nobody cares about that.”

“That’s not exactly true,” I said.

“Okay,” you said, “if you live by what people say about you, then maybe it’s not true. But nobody I know cares.”

“And when a hundred cameras flash in your face with a statue of Big Foot behind you?”

You chuckled: “The camera people are gone, dad. You have to notice your environment more.”

I couldn’t argue because I hadn’t seen them around either. I just figured that they were camped out somewhere with our pictures on the trailer wall, waiting for the day.... A bit ludicrous.

“Okay,” I said. “All right.... You’re right. How about tomorrow?”

You were both relieved and panicked, if that is possible. “No – no – I want to go this afternoon.” You let me look into your eyes – I guess because of your desperation. It surprised me when I recognized your mother’s eyes, slightly crossed in a narrow face, with a hint of the same frustration and distance, the eyes of someone left in line when the ship finished loading, or facing an airport ticket counter with all flights cancelled.

“All right,” I said. “But why does it have to be today? I’ve got plans, too, you know.”

“My friends will be there.”

“Why don’t you just get them to take you?”

“I can’t really ask,” you said.

Friends that you can’t ask – that was all the evidence I needed that this had to do with the opposite sex. I looked around for Doreen. “All right, Brett. Give me fifteen minutes or so.”

You looked relieved, and as you left: “We don’t have to go for another hour.” And you were gone.

A metallic taste formed in my mouth, but I shook my head, stretched my shoulders and went back to the disjointed story taking form on the LCD screen before me. The hour went by in a flash, but I was ready to get out of the house. You, Brett, had to be reminded of our deal as you doodled in your room. Or it was an act; I couldn’t tell.

I told Doreen where we were going, but she didn’t seem surprised, so I knew how this had all progressed. Still, it felt good to be walking to the car with you, a couple guys heading out together, doing their stuff. We didn’t talk much; you were preoccupied and I was getting more nervous all the time. The signs, half amateurish, half commercialized, led us to a field with an attendant (charging for parking in a cow field?), and a hundred or more cars. The number impressed me. We walked toward a field from which spewed a thin cloud of straw dust and dirt, with distant music, displaying a number of large tents and pennants flapping slowly in the wind.

A ticket taker was selling admission, checking re-entry stamps, and taking tickets that came from who knows where. He was dressed in something approximating late middle-ages garb and had the wide eyes, unbridled facial and cranial hair one might project back into such a rough-hewn age. The pointed-toe soft shoes were a nice touch, though they lent a bit too much of the clown motif.

“Two,” I said.

He gave me some frou-frou Renaissance-speak and waited for my response. When I didn’t play the game, he took my \$20 and bowed slightly and waved us into the fairgrounds. You started moving away from me immediately, and I shouted, “Okay, Brett, we’ll meet back here in an hour to check in. All right?” You seemed to nod before you strode away, faster than I thought possible. I was left alone at the edge of the festival.

No one gave me another glance. A Renaissance Fayre crowd was engaged in preparations for jousting and hand-to-hand combat. A respectable Carolina rock-and-roll band was playing for dancers and picnickers. Lines had formed at a beer booth and a rice-and-chicken wrap place. There were a few sideshow attractions, and a few booths offering New Age wares. People did not seem as numerous as the cars promised, but even the thin attendance at so many venues added up to a positive impression.

I wandered by the stage, then eyed the beer stand. I couldn’t justify the indulgence and went on to the booths. I had no idea how I would fill an hour. The pyramids and homeopathic snake oils wouldn’t do it, and the grunting, oath-uttering jousters weren’t going to cut it, either. The sun was hot and irritating. I went back to the wrap place, waited for a good ten minutes and finally got a frozen lemonade.

With refreshment and a bit more sugar in the bloodstream, I wandered back to the booths. That’s when I met her. You have to understand, Brett, I wasn’t looking for an encounter. I wouldn’t mention it except that you may wonder how this part of the story started. Barbara Hohenstauffen. I thought I was familiar with the type. She had long bushy hair, substituting volume for style, was freckled, with thick white skin, luminescent brown eyes outlined in mascara, with a wide, smooth face and full if not overly long white teeth; not too tall, with wide hips and noticeable but not too defined bosom, a gait that threatened to move into free-form dance at any point. Loose clothing, colorful lacy cotton flowingly cut. There was nothing unexpected about her selling pyramids and life-energy pap. The surprise was that she saw me.

The booth was empty when I took a look at some crystal pyramids that projected a variety of spectra on the shelf that held them. I leaned over to try to read the blurb about the life-generating effects, but then thought better of it. I turned, and she was directly behind me.

“May I see your hand?” she asked. I thought at first that she must have suspected that I had taken a pyramid and concealed it in my hand. I opened my hand palm up and made to deny any such intentions. The whole while she had a smile on her face that seemed completely out of context with what I thought was happening.

“Thank you,” she said and took my hand in both of hers. She leaned over at the neck so far that her hair fell over and obscured our hands.

I could then feel one of her fingers tracing out lines in my palm, a sensation that made this moment intimate in a way that made my whole body tense. A faint waft of perfume reinforced the tension.

She felt that, looked up with a headshake to throw her hair back, and even took a half a step away. “Your palm fits you,” she said, still with the smile and now with a small nod to encourage me.

“What?” I asked.

“I can give you a palm reading,” she said as she let go of my hand.

I could feel my cheeks redden, a bit chagrined for having let this get this far. “I’m sorry,” I said, “I don’t believe in this kind of thing.”

She broadened a knowing, but not condescending or fatuous smile. “I know,” she said lightly.

Of course, that made me wonder what she was selling with a palm reading.

“I like doing palm readings for skeptics,” she said as she moved away from me back into her booth. “They always surprise.”

I didn’t know whether to answer (“so do non sequiturs”) or just walk away.

She didn’t wait and moved to the back of her booth. I hesitated for a few seconds – I suppose I was tempted to keep this completely unexpected encounter alive – then turned away. Suddenly from behind me: “You’re the bog monster, aren’t you.” Not a question.

I took just a step, and found myself immobilized again. I decided that I couldn’t leave that unanswered, both as a communicative gesture and as a challenge. I turned and tried to say good-humoredly, “You saw that in my palm?”

It seemed that she had said that without looking at me, and only raised her eyes after a few seconds. She was half surprised to see me facing her. “No, I recognized your face.”

Stupid, I thought. She was just mocking me, even a life-energy gypsy....

“But it makes sense. It’s in your aura.”

“My aura?” I tried to sound skeptical but not mocking.

She squinted at me. “Yes, definitely.” Then she looked away – maybe down the way to the stage – as she related the following: “All living creatures have an aura, a pattern of psychic energy that surrounds their physical being. The aura changes with your mood, but it’s also as distinctive as a fingerprint, a signature – a palm.” She looked at me, the smile working its way in. “I see the pain in your aura.” A pause. “You suffer for your creature.” Another. “Because it bears your anxiety for you.”

“What?” was all I could say.

“I can work up your profile,” she said, looking down and speaking now as if rehearsed, “but it takes a lot of energy, a lot of time. I can’t do an aura for free, it’s way too draining, psychically.”

I didn’t want to end the conversation on that point, so I asked: “Do you believe in the bog monster?”

She squinted at me and then smiled broadly. “Oh, yes, without a doubt.” She turned back to her task, but added with a flick of her head: “Take my card – in case you change your mind.” I took two measured steps forward, reached into the crystal cardholder and took one. “Thanks,” I said. Stupid, I thought and walked away.

That whole exchange took less than two minutes, and I wanted nothing more than to be driving away from this place. I wandered up and down a bit, trying to recognize your silhouette among the young people. Nowhere. It took twenty minutes and I saw you coming from the creek with a small group, on a path from what turned out to be a small shrine to the bog monster. When you were safely off to watch the next band tune up and do a sound check, I followed the path down to the creek side. There was a

reproduction of a painting nailed to a tree, an artist's rendering of the bog monster – a hyper-realistic painting of a cross between a typical Big Foot and a gorilla emerging from the muck. The portrait was festooned with flowers and surrounded by small votive candles. A corkboard covered by scraps of paper with sentiments – “Marry me, bog monster” and “what a crock!” and “please grant me a cure” – fascinated me, even while I grew progressively more ill at ease.

On my return I saw your group moving among the booths, trying, it seemed, to extort free samples or buy some of the cheapest wares. You yourself haggled with Barbara H.; I could not tell with what degree of irony, but she seemed not to be engaging with you. I can't tell you anymore how that made me feel; I was probably pleased, not only because it would mean that she did not recognize you. I studied your group: no one I knew, but it had three boys and two girls. A volatile combination. I couldn't tell how you related to each of them; they did not seem to stop for your hamming-up and did not seem to pay particular attention to you. But you were part of the group, definitely, and I was pleased about that.

I tried not to follow you, even with my eyes, but the area was not large enough to lose sight of you once I had it. I listened to the band, and also tried not to let my eyes settle on Barbara's booth. I took out the card I had pocketed:

PsychEnergy of Pittsboro, NC
“Because life is psychic energy”
Readings, Consultations & Wares
Jerry Brook & Barbara Hohenstauffen

I tried to enjoy the music for a while, but a crick in my back kept coming back, and I still wanted nothing more than to walk out the gate. Two songs came and went, and I realized I had lost track of you. That's when I noticed your group huddled beside the stage, looking conspiratorial and silly. I had a sinking feeling, confirmed a few moments later. One of the girls bounded onto the stage and whispered for a while into the singer's ear. She hustled off the stage, but not before he began: “Ladies and gentlemen, we have a special treat today.... You are all familiar with the modern and local legend of the bog monster. With us today is Brett Densch, the middle-schooler who uncovered the evidence of our monster. Brett,” he said with his mouth glued to the mic and looking over at you, “please come up.” There was a smattering of claps and whoops. You went up onto the stage with a wave – thankfully nothing like a bow or blown kisses – and stood next to the singer. “So, Brett,” he said, “tell us a little bit about this bog monster you discovered.” He relinquished the mic and you moved up to it. Your mouth directly against the wind screen, you began to speak, your voice booming deep and yet cutting sharp at that volume: “Thanks. I want to thank you all for coming out today” – you shot a look at your group; this was probably part of the bet – “and let me just say that the bog monster and I are on the best of terms, and he thinks this festival rocks!” Your fists went in the air, as if anticipating a thunderous response. None came, just a few random shouts and claps. You said a few other things that I have no recollection of, and went off stage. The group members were mostly laughing among themselves, but you seemed or tried not to notice. I could see finally and clearly how you were trying to gather the attention of the stage-whispering girl with your comments and your eyes. She noticed, but didn't respond; she mostly joked with the other boys. For me it was a mercy when you all went to get some lemonade.

After a few more songs, the band took a break. The canned music was still loud but quiet by comparison. I kept imagining that someone would turn around and scream at me like a pod person identifying the last flesh-and-blood human. Or maybe I was the pod person, still concerned about being found out. No one seemed to even know that a body was sitting here, which made the moment with Barbara all the stranger, more stark. Then you showed up next to me: “Let's go.” I wanted to ask about your group, but you were already moving. I guess a question had finally been answered for you.

The young man slept more soundly with his new exoskeleton, but when he awoke he found that its tension was gone and he was splayed against the floor. He was not surprised when a door on the far wall popped open and a bug padded in. When another, larger bug followed, he became more apprehensive. He tried to raise his head, but the muscles were still too weak.

The first bug – perhaps the same from the last time – moved to the side and the larger bug stepped forward. It was no more than eight feet from his head. It dropped to the ground with a thwap, and one large appendage bent back over and pulled something from its concave back. The object was a ball, a softball-sized silver ball, with protrusions and etchings all over the surface. The bug bounced the ball in its foot/hand, as if weighing it, then suddenly moved its hand forward and down. The ball rolled toward the young man.

He didn't have many options. The ball was rolling toward his head, so he put out his hand to stop it. When contact was made, he received an electrical jolt unlike any in his life. It pulsed through his fingers, up his arm and across his body; a white light filled his vision for an instant; he could feel his entire body shudder. The ball seemed glued to his hand, until the electrical pulse weakened. He was unable to think during two complete cycles, then he made a monumental effort to push, and the ball rolled away from him. Half way to the bug.

That bug lifted its body and padded forward to the ball. It lowered the front half of its body, took hold of the ball with its two miniature black arms, and gave it a shove. The ball clanged on the floor and rolled toward the young man again. He tried to punch it shortly before it reached him, but his strength gave out when he struck the ball. Three cycles passed this time before he was able to push the ball away, and it rolled a foot. The bug, still tipped forward, padded up to the ball, grabbed it and pushed it to within inches of the young man.

He cursed and added: "This is torture, it's not allowed." He relaxed his arms in protest.

The two bugs started clicking and whooping. The bigger bug got up on all fours and padded backwards to its original position. There was a minute of impasse, then "whoomp!" The exoskeleton powered up. The young man stochastically raised himself to a standing position. The ball still lay inches from him. He moved a half step forward and gave it a great kick. He realized what a bad idea this was when he broke his large toe on contact – the cracking sound was unmistakable – though the ball did become airborne and seemed to threaten the larger bug. But a field of some kind bled off its momentum, and the ball fell with a clunk in front of the bug. The young man lowered his body to a lotus position. He winced at the sight of his toe but otherwise kept his eyes on them.

The larger bug repeated his earlier efforts, though the ball came at the human more slowly, rolling to a stop about a foot from him. He stood, carefully put his good foot behind the ball and gave it a moderate push. The shock was profound, but short lived. The larger bug pushed it back, and with a wince the young man repeated his action. When the ball came back yet again, the young man surrendered, moved to a cowering position in the corner, and just looked at the silver ball. The bugs started chattering. This went on for quite a while; the door behind the bugs opened then closed twice. Finally the larger bug came at him – either to get the ball or to roll it to him again – but stopped, dropped to his belly and flexed his main forearms/legs up, as if to ask what the human was going to do. That's when the young man reacted: "You want me to touch the goddam ball again? Do you think I'm afraid of it? Of you?" He crawled forward, grimaced at the bug and slapped his hand onto the ball. Even though he knew no actual eyes were looking into his eyes, he kept his on the bug – as the shock spread throughout his bones with a burning ache, boiled in his stomach, and exploded in his ears. "Aaaaagghhh," he spat out once the charge decreased. The bug did not move. Then the blue-tinged white light filled his senses again...

He found himself sprawled on the ground, apparently much later because the lighting had changed, with a wrapped hand but no ball or bug in sight. His toe ached, but he noticed that it, too, had been wrapped and set.

He heard the “whoomp,” began the motions to sit up, and listened for motion at the wall door. He was upright and sitting before the door opened. After a few moments, a bug – the first one? – entered and padded half the way to him. It set itself down and let its limbs rest beside its torso. There was a long waiting period, during which the young man assumed they were testing his mental state. What had the episode with the ball done to him? For one thing, he couldn’t say why he had reacted as he had.

Amid clicks and trills, the lights lowered. Next to the bug, a curtain of sparkles came down like confetti over a party, but it stayed in the air; slowly an image formed on the surface of the cloud. It was a crude representation of a star system with planets, maybe with detail that only their eyes or antennae could discern. The third planet looked a lot like earth. Something resembling a spaceship emerged at the right lower corner and disappeared as it approached earth and shrank to its scaled size. After a few seconds, it emerged again and zoomed off the screen to the right. The perspective changed: the solar system moved to the upper left on the screen, with earth enlarged so that you could see its orbiting; the orbits sped up until the motion was barely visible in a solid ring around the sun. Meanwhile, the star pattern in the main part of the screen began to change. A small number of stars, patently the near ones, began to move off to the left – as the years passed. The young man understood. Dozens, hundreds, maybe even thousands of years passed. Finally, the rotation of the sun’s satellite slowed to a crawl, and the star pattern settled in. One of the stars grew in size until it was a sun with its own planets. The fifth planet, brown and white in swirls, expanded to fill the entire screen. Okay, clear enough. This was supposed to be his new home.

“All right,” he said. “You just told me that I have traveled thousands of years across space to a distant world. The timescale is important, right. Everyone, everything I’ve ever known is dead, has been for millennia. I’m supposed to be resigned to this prison, right? A zoo, maybe?”

The bug seemed to be listening.

“Except that I don’t believe you’re real.” He nodded slowly to make the point. “You’re a dream, an illusion in an elaborate dream state. You don’t exist. You *can’t* exist. You’re an impossibility. The only question is whether I will ever wake up... Maybe it’s my personal hell. Do you know what hell is?”

A brief clicking spell indicated a response of some kind.

“Okay, I assume you do.” He half smiled, for the first time since awakening in this cell. “But before we discuss eschatology, we should at least have a formal introduction. My name is Derek Sorensen. Pleased to meet you.” He lifted a hand in a half greeting.

The bug clicked a series, paused, repeated it. Derek tried to transliterate it in his head. “Click-cluck-ack” was the first part. He said, “Okay, why don’t I call you Click-Cluck. My pleasure, Click-Cluck.”

The screen beside the bug dissolved to black. What followed was a jumble of excerpts from television, Derek’s vintage. A preview, he concluded, to the earthly library holdings of the bug people from their recent artifact-collecting mission. Maybe, coming back with a specimen of the planet’s apex predator was just a bonus, and a collection of music videos and Clint Eastwood movies had been their actual goal.

The outlines of his new life became clear. The main bug, Click-Cluck, came once or twice a day in order to cluck a few new things at him: he assumed they were words or phrases, but he couldn’t be sure. He tried to guess their meaning but couldn’t say if he was comprehending or fooling himself. Sometimes there were quizzes, when the bug would stop and point with its withered forelimbs at itself or the plate of food or even at Derek. He would attempt to cluck the words. The bug brought him a dime-store notebook and a Bic pen, and he began writing down a vocabulary. There was a dull ritual to all this,

such that Derek might even have reason to doubt his dream-state theory, but he convinced himself that his cognitive energy, so diverted, was more than capable of creating this level of dream realism.

His book would be moved after he slept, indicating their interest in his efforts at xeno-linguistics. For its part the bug seemed intent on learning English words. Every session began with clucks and clicks spilling out of its mouth in a vain effort to create the resonance of a voice box. Still, Derek began to recognize the cluck equivalents of letters like “d” and “g” and “k” and “t.” Articulated vowels and some consonants were simply impossible, but these consonants bordered on the possible.

Derek did his best to click and cluck some sounds, but he had no idea how to make his tongue create the others. By his count, there were fifteen distinct cluck sounds. He suspected they would resolve into more with time, since he had only recognized five or six for a number of hours. The bug seemed to create most of the sounds with a stiff tongue, as it moved against in-mouth protrusions that were like teeth. Then again, some sounds involved the external mandibles in a way he couldn’t see: when the bug spoke slowly, the contact points were impossible to intuit, as the sound itself evaporated; when the bug spoke normally, the movement was too rapid. A few sounds, rattles really, emanated from deep within the bug’s frontal area.

Derek knew enough to realize that he was sleeping on someone else’s time. The nights stretched on forever on those occasions when he couldn’t sleep. The days were interminable, if he was not engrossed in something. He guessed this day was twice earth’s period. The evening food seemed to contain some sort of sleeping drug that usually kept him down during the bugs’ daily rituals: cleaning the room of his excretions, sweat and oils; administering more microinjections and conducting who knows what other tests; and reviewing his work in the notebook. For all he knew, they all called it a day soon after the drug took hold and they’d done the necessary.

He had grown accustomed to his bareness. The bugs, too, bore no clothing, although he had not yet seen their tail ends and could only guess what they hid back there. They did eventually provide him with a cloth that seemed thought as a diaper; when he had to go in the corner of his room, he used the cloth to cover the waste. The next morning, he would have a new cloth. He seldom went: the glop they served dissolved almost completely in his digestive system, and it was sufficiently imbued with liquid that he drank little. He and Click-Cluck found a mutually understandable word (“clunk-thwack-ugh”) to designate a container of water. It would come with a greenish hue in something that resembled a dog bowl, but he drank it up to show his cooperative spirit. The green stuff left no aftertaste.

After morning lessons, his exoskeleton would be powered down. He couldn’t tell if it was completely disabled because he was able to move around regardless. Perhaps his muscles were coming back. They gave him something that looked like a balloon but felt more like a basketball; he dribbled it, bounced it off the wall (he wondered if they jumped behind the two-way mirror), and passed it behind his back to the sidewall. The room was too small and low to play basketball for real. When he grew tired or bored, he would roll the ball slowly to the wall, which would open, swallow the ball and close.

Most afternoons, he would see the bug again, and they would run through more vocabulary. The bug would engage the cloud projector and show TV images – frozen in blurry relief – and point to something. Sometimes, the bug would ask for the English word and at other times would venture the Bug word. Sometimes, the image would flow to reveal a movement of some kind: batting a baseball; kissing; walking up stairs; a car splashing water on people waiting for a bus; eating a steak; and so on. Very human-centric. Derek would describe it, sometimes at great length, and the bug would slowly work him down to the minimum, using some phrases that he recognized to mean, “Again” and something like, “More precision.” The bug would describe the scene as well, and Derek thought he could hear the rudiments of their grammar: how sounds were added before the thing’s name to indicate the action. He would transcribe what he could and try to recognize the patterns. He was not as disciplined as he might have been, and it took him longer to pick out patterns than it took the bugs.

After the afternoon's work – or sometimes the bug wouldn't show and he would try to spend the afternoon as he could, helped by a television show or two – he would be left alone with his dinner. In the evening, he recorded what he had done that day, insofar as it had not been captured in his vocabulary work. One entry:

I try to accommodate the bugs, as I can. They are, after all, me. This room betrays its roots in the sensory deprivation of a comatose mind. Thank God for the bugs tending to my abandoned ego self. They are an impossible projection, but their world is consistent, coherent and not without intellectual challenges. I cannot tell you what would happen to me if I were alone in this isolation. I fear an uncontrollable insanity.

The evening would fade into darkness and he would recognize a powerful sleepiness coming over him, and he would resolve yet again to skip dinner in order to test his theory of drugging. Sometimes he thought that his captive mind needed an unconscious period and that it invented the feeling of drugs to explain how this need overtook his apparent reality. A few times he did skip dinner, but could never convince himself that drugs were part of the fare. He would wake up early; dinner was gone; and he was hungry. No noticeable hangover or sense of deprivation.

Days merged one into the next, and still he had no plan. It was enough, he found himself thinking, to live from one day to the next. With each unconscious breath he could feel how life can be its own reason, but somehow it seemed wrong – a betrayal of the life that he wanted to live, the past that was beyond his reach but that could be his again, if only he could resolve to break through these walls. But then he asked himself, what if he threw himself against the walls and the bugs stopped coming? He would know that he had condemned himself to the encroaching madness.

I don't read tabloids, but they must put their stories out on the wire sometimes. The *Chapel Hill Reporter* picked up one because of its local interest. I sank in my chair when I saw the teaser, just above the attribution to a weekly tabloid: "College town stalked by hideous creature." Accompanying the story was a sinister image of the creature, similar to what I had seen portrayed at the festival, manifestly drawn by the same hand, but to a very different end. In the short article, found on page E5, a local farmer "Bubby Frank" was quoted as having seen the monster walk away with several of his egg-laying hens hanging lifeless from its massive hands. A police report, so the news weekly, confirmed the tale (though in an addendum the *Reporter* relayed that it was unable to find such at any of the local police or sheriff departments). Your name, Brett, was mentioned as the local youth who had uncovered its reign of terror over so many years.

I wanted to call the tabloid and see what I could find out about "Bubby," but that was an obvious way to self-immolation. Instead, I called the *Reporter*. It took two days, but the local editor who had run the article got back to me.

He sounded bemused. "John Densch, eh? Can't leave this story alone? You know we had a story ready to run about your son and the Bog Monster festival, but we decided not to run it. It really aggravated the guy who wrote the story. I wouldn't be surprised if he wrote this one for the tabloids."

"I hope this helps you see you made the right call."

"Oh sure," he said. "The whole story just keeps falling below our standards."

I let that be for a few moments. "So who's the reporter? He's local?"

"Sure," he said. "He's done a number of color pieces for us lately. But because we didn't run his story it's not appropriate for me to give you his name. Sorry."

Sorry, sure, I thought. "Okay, thanks." I hung up and resolved to find him myself. It's a small paper; there weren't more than a handful of suspects, and only one with the quirky sensibility that would alight on bog monsters, terrified farmers and tabloids.

I called the only matching name in the local white pages. "Barry Moore?"

“Yeah?” He had what you might call a tough voice, gravelly and world-weary, but I think you know the type: poseur. I could imagine the well-trimmed beard, carefully ironed plaid shirts and a library of stances that he practiced before the mirror.

“This is John Densch. I thought maybe we should talk.”

He was silent for a few moments. “What do you think I want to hear from you?”

“Well,” I said, “maybe you want to know the truth about this whole monster thing.”

He chuckled. “And you’re the one to give me the truth?”

“More than Bubby Frank,” I said with an edge.

He hadn’t expected that, but he caught up: “Bubby is a reliable, uninterested witness, whereas you’re manifestly entangled, if not ensnared in your own self-interest.”

“Okay, look, Barry. I don’t care what you write about this damn bog monster. I just want you to leave my son out of it.”

“Ah,” he said. “Fatherly love. Very touching.”

I felt a streak of anger flare up but didn’t want to go that way: “It’s the least you could do. He didn’t deserve any of this. I’m the one you should be pillorying.”

“I’m not pillorying anyone,” he said: “I’m interested in the human story.” And finally, because he couldn’t help himself: “I’m writing a book about it.”

“A book?” I was incredulous. “This is a made-up story; there’s no book here.”

He laughed. “You don’t understand, do you, John? ... Look, I’ll be happy to sit down with you and get your version. Who knows, maybe you’ll convince me. There’ve been Sasquatch sightings in Virginia I can look into instead.”

We agreed to meet at Carolina Brewery as a first step in this negotiation. Doreen had her usual face on when I told her, but she was preoccupied with other matters and didn’t say anything. You were at your own business. I drove straightaway to the pub and set myself at the bar, which was unoccupied at the time. I ordered a pale ale and waited. Barry surprised me when he arrived: a short and relatively thin man, unassuming in dress and manner, he wasn’t the poseur I had thought, nor did I see anything about him that matched the deep raspy voice. He had a nervous energy about him, so you could understand the wiry frame beneath the comfortable outdoors clothing, and his thin face had the wrinkles of someone who had spent a great deal of time outside – or had recently given up chain-smoking. His head was crowned by fairly long and stiff gray and black hair that strayed out from his head but mostly fell back in a messy sort of mullet. He had reading glasses hanging down on his chest. He set himself down next to me, but spent the next half an hour alternating between sitting, leaning on the stool and standing.

He discussed what was on tap for a few minutes with the bartender but eventually settled on an espresso. Only then did he address me: “John Densch.”

“Yes,” I said.

“Do you mind?” he said as he pulled out a mini-cassette recorder.

“Can I review what you write for accuracy?”

“When it’s published,” he said blankly.

I didn’t respond, so he clicked it on.

“John, can you tell me what you know about the bog monster of Orange County?”

I relayed all I could remember of the beginning of this mess. He listened, nodding at various points; whether he was affirming my account or mentally noting supposed inaccuracies, I couldn’t tell.

“Very good,” he said, as if rewarding a trained seal. I wasn’t impressed. “That is very interesting stuff. I have some details of my own, but it always helps to get the story straight from the wolf’s mouth.”

“What details?” I asked.

“This is a great deal more complicated than you know, John. But I don’t fault you for that. In fact, the public explanation is the only one that makes sense. A kids’ prank, prodded on by a vainglorious adult.”

I quaffed to avoid cursing at him.

“In reality, John, there has been a systematic government effort to suppress public knowledge about a species of humanoid creatures variously known as Big Foot, Sasquatch, Yeti – and now Bog Monster.” He waited for my reaction, but when he saw that I wasn’t going to dignify that with a counter-argument he went on. “I can show you the visual, biological and anthropological evidence another time. I can’t carry it all, and a bar counter isn’t the right place to evaluate these materials. The point is that in order to recognize the value of the evidence you have to move beyond the conviction *that there cannot be evidence*. You need to realize that conspiracies do exist.”

“I’m not adverse to conspiracy theories,” I said.

“Good. I’m not talking about your Roswell conspiracies, Area 51, all that crap. There is one way, and one way only, to know the difference between crap and reality. The smell test. What does the evidence smell like? What odor emanates from the government denials? Do you smell honest sweat on the witnesses and experts? You’ve got to clear your nose first, Densch, or there is no way to separate the truth from the usual scat left in your path.”

“Very poetic,” I said, “but that sounds like solipsism to me. And why are you telling all this to me? I know how the bog monster story started, and it has nothing to do with government cover-ups.”

“Okay,” he said. “You know the beginning of the bog monster story. You also saw some evidence of large predator interventions over many years in the Bolin Creek area, evidence that is subject to some skepticism but convinced you. Right?” I half nodded. “Do you know the *Indian legends* and *modern ghost stories* that parallel and corroborate your son’s half-scientific report? Have you sat down with the dozens of sane individuals who can provide firsthand encounters with these unexplained creatures?”

“And – what if I told you that Duke University, maybe the largest federal grant recipient of any institution in the southeast, is implicated in this cover-up? That the far-flung pieces of Duke Forest serve as a shelter of last resort for the Bog Monster? That the Duke primate center, supposedly dedicated to the lemur, is a cover for research into an unknown endangered species, a species for which public acknowledgement could simultaneously mean extinction? Would you dismiss me as a crackpot? Or are the stakes sufficiently high now that you are willing to suspend your disbelief, and listen?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “What ghost stories?”

He looked down and sipped. “I’m collecting them for the book.” Nothing further.

“What evidence do you have for the Duke stuff? Who are these reliable witnesses?”

“Tell me,” he said. “What evidence would convince you?”

“A body, I suppose.”

“Exactly,” he said. “Exactly what the government is going to make sure never happens. We have to agree on another standard if we’re going to get anywhere.”

“Anything else can be faked, or be the result of a misunderstanding. ‘Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof.’”

“Don’t misquote Carl Sagan at me. He also wrote: ‘If we’ve been bamboozled long enough, we tend to reject any evidence of the bamboozle.’”

“I’m sure he wasn’t talking about Big Foot there.”

“No, he would have rejected Big Foot out of hand. He wasn’t ready to admit that science depends upon social conditions quite alien to its core. He also argued: ‘Our species needs, and deserves, a citizenry with minds wide awake and a basic understanding of how the world works.’ Yet he would never acknowledge how science blithely affirms the existing human order, while it goes about creating the appearance of order in the natural world. Science mirrors the conditions that enable its insights;

change the conditions, and you change the science. That has always been true, both before and after the introduction of the all-consuming master narrative we know as Progress.”

I didn't see any sense in pursuing him down that path, so I said: “That may all be, but to me it's beyond believable that these creatures have co-existed with us while eluding capture for all these decades and centuries.”

“Well, I won't bore you with the history of unexpected species popping up in unanticipated places. It's quite extensive, actually. And we'll have to agree to disagree about the importance of anecdotal and folk revelations. What really matters is – the smell test.”

“Well, frankly, I smell bull.”

“Of course you do. That's because it's in your nose all the time.”

The Duke Forest is laid out in six large patches across three counties, 7000 acres of controlled access, forest in perpetuity. The Blackwood section, a test site in Chapel Hill, is studded by great towers spewing the extra carbon dioxide that the rest of us should expect to breathe sometime later this century. All the chunks are used for biological and forestry research. There are roads and trails spread out throughout the forest, but great stretches are inaccessible and closed to the public. I've wandered into more than one thicket in my GPS ventures, and never seen anything untoward. But what was I looking for? That moment when the GPS's distance-to-goal zeros out. Any number of eyes could have been glued on me, and I would not have noticed.

In fact, I usually feel watched when I'm searching for point zero. You might think that being observed makes me feel more alive, but I see it more as a collateral cost in my quest. I'm always entering someone else's space, and that just makes me more determined not to stop. It is a funny thing, a professional deformation, I guess. The virtual Orange County I ply for information day-to-day is exactly the county that I pace off – why is one public record and the other eternally private space? I can see closing off buildings, and the legitimacy of “no hunting,” and “keep your sightseeing butt off my land” signs. But why can't I ever touch the land that you've been deeded? Why can't I see what you're doing with those twenty some acres, unless I'm two hundred feet up in the air? There ought to be a right for public access, once a year maybe. A two-week notice period. A public process with the right of appeal. Make it stinking hard. But let me touch the clay, feel the bumps on the tree bark, hear the cicadas, and then get out. Make an honest man out of me.

Barry and I parted on (to me) surprisingly good terms. His perfect paranoid vision – a conspiracy always just beyond his ability to unravel it – was compelling in its own way. He talked loftily, but I was still afraid he would sell me out for another sensational story in the tabloid – or maybe I was looking forward to the confabulation, I can't reliably say. We agreed to meet again, under circumstances more advantageous for sharing his evidence, though I assumed I wouldn't see anything until it was just a footnote – neither convincing nor easily explained away – in his published book.

Your mother didn't say anything about this incident, but I knew I would hear about it, someday, sometime. She looked at me, working through something in her head, but there were no visible signs on her face, except the one, the distanced, troubled look that I know so well.

I was not willing to betray my thoughts to her, not only because I was sure that Doreen would assess Barry to be pond scum, but because Barry was my connection back to Barbara H. “Oh, I was there at the bog monster festival that afternoon. I saw you two,” he said late in our conversation, when I was a bit tipsy and he was drunk on his presentation. “I saw the sparks fly.” That was an obvious exaggeration to which he appended a smile, but he said, “I've gotten a profile myself. She drew the line at that, or I'd be getting them weekly.”

“Really? So what did she find in your aura?”

“A lot of crap. She says I'm obsessed with excrement.”

“You seem to be.”

“I’m obsessed with getting the smell out of my nostrils. She, on the other hand, was just responding to things I had already told her.”

“Do you believe there is an aura around living beings?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. She’s deluding herself for the sake of her marriage. Turns out, her husband actually believes it. I imagine he is psychotic and can’t help himself. She squints and pretends, and charms her way to a clientele of mostly middle-aged men.”

“Why is her finding an aura so different from your phantom humanoids?”

“I don’t think you need me to answer that. Let’s just imagine I’m trying to sell you on life aura, and just incidentally she’s the one marshaling evidence of a giant humanoid cover-up. Do you even give me the time of day?”

“Time of day, maybe,” I said, and we dropped the subject. Barbara Hohenstauffen was both more and less attractive to me after that moment, and the thought of her created a vague sensation of guilt, especially as I sat next to Doreen at the dinner table but found myself returning to the festival field, perusing crystalline pyramids and bee wax suppositories. Doreen was staring at me as I returned to our dinner. She might have been afraid of those moments – she obsesses on the fact that my mother, your grandmother, suffers from dementia. I wanted to say what I was thinking, but that could lead to an all-too-awkward silence or another proxy battle over you, Brett, though really over our disappointment with each other, a difficult thing to get your mind around over a shared meal in a small common space, one much too small for such moments.

Barry delivered on a visit to the pseudonymous Bubby Frank’s plot of land. It was not far from the Blackwood section of Duke Forest, but hardly adjacent. Closer to the Maple Farms ice cream store. Still, it is not impossible to imagine a large creature slipping over fences and across arteries under the cover of night. Mr. Frank was not present when we drove up his driveway. There was a small house and a few mold-stained trailers arrayed around a courtyard of sorts. The chicken coop was dilapidated but alive with chickens wandering around and in and out. That morning was dark and gray, threatening but unlikely to rain. Barry kept an eye out along the road and into the little forested stand to the opposite side, as if fairly certain that we would be joined by someone, whether by a surprised resident or a surprise visitor.

What was there to say? I couldn’t picture the bog monster emerging from the nearby half-acre stand to devastate the coop; it was simply too incongruous. I looked at Barry, expecting him to shrug.

“You can’t sense it?” he asked.

“What? The bog monster’s aura?”

“No, cretin,” he said without emphasis, “the fact that something is missing?”

“How could I know whether anything is missing, except maybe the owner?”

“Dogs,” he said.

“The bog monster ate the dogs?”

“No. This property has no dogs. Frank’s got something against them.”

I waited for the bombshell, but then said, “Okay. Any marauder would avoid a place with dogs loping about.”

He swung around and said triumphantly, “That’s right! – Come on.”

We approached the house. He stopped at the near side of the house. He pointed to a floodlight aimed out into the common area of the driveway. A small box hung below it, barely attached and half smashed. A movement sensor.

“No dogs, but lights. There’s another one of these on the side of coop. It’s busted, too.”

“So somebody broke them. Bubby maybe.”

“He had no reason to. He’s not getting any fame out of this. He’s staying out of the limelight. And that story barely covered my expenses for the amount of time it took to research and write.”

We stood there for a few minutes, awkwardly checking things out, moving in different directions. The place felt suddenly much quieter, even tranquil, like a beach after a storm. I wanted not to believe Barry at all, but it didn't smell like crap, as he might say. Mud, wet leaves, chicken shit a little. Finally, Barry took me over to the coop and picked up a board from against the wall. A 4x1 plank that was broken at one end. In the middle were distinct scratches and indentations, as if a massive hand had pulled that plank to its breaking point.

"Hmmm," I said. I could see where several planks were new and out of character on the coop. "Still, that's not really evidence, either. – What about foot prints?"

"You'd think," Barry said, still contemplating the board. "But the incident came just before a storm. The ground was as hard as cement during the incident."

"Any of that good forensic evidence? Hair? DNA?"

"Yes, you would think we'd find some hair, right?" he said. "But remember I said a storm, with a fair amount of wind and rain. I found nothing when I came out to speak with Bubby."

"That's a lot of coincidence for why there's no evidence."

"Coincidence?" he repeated back to me. "You really believe that all of this could be coincidence?"

"Not necessarily," I said, but not sure how to answer. "So – you're saying that the bog monster planned this?"

He smiled. "Either that, or I'm bullshitting you. Take your pick."

I grunted, not sure I wanted to say what I was feeling. After a few more minutes, we got back into the car. As we entered onto the highway, I said what was on my mind: "If Duke scientists are supposed to be looking after this creature, why is he out making trouble?"

Barry looked at me as if to say, finally. "Indeed," he said. "The most mind-bending part of this is that the creature can't know that it's being cared for. That would be the end of the experiment, a simultaneous end to the balancing act between its need for authentic existence and our desire for order."

I thought about that all the way to 3Cups, a local café; Barry was fascinated by alcohol culture – breweries, wine shops, bars – but preferred caffeination.

We were sitting and drinking before I spoke. "So the creature is a prisoner, but one that believes in its anonymity and freedom?"

"Voilà," he said. "The perfect symbol for the society that holds it in its thrall."

I don't remember what else we said – I kept coming back to this – but after about 20 minutes Barry had his phone out and made an appointment for my aura profile at PsychEnergy for the coming weekend. I remember him slumping a bit when Barbara's husband took the call, but the appointment was put on her schedule. "I'll be accompanying him," he said with an air of complete freedom to do what he chose. I wasn't sure if he was looking to reconnect with her or to capture information for his next article.

"All right, Barry," I said finally, after I told him I really had to go. "Let's assume you're not just feeding me bullshit. We've got several more problems, foremost of which is the lineage. Are you saying that there is a whole family holed up in the Duke Forest? And even if there is, how do they propagate – are they completely inbred, the mother with the son, etc.?"

"Sure," he said, "I wouldn't put it past them, under duress, to propagate that way. But they are not alone, John. There are confirmed sightings all around us, Georgia, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, the entire western portion of this state. These creatures are unusual only in their dogged loyalty to this place, this outpost."

"So – they import a bride?"

"More likely," he said, "they sent their children off to find a new life in the mountains. I think we have our last generation here. The raid on the farmer fits the MO of your creature 50 years ago. That means either they pass on very specific behaviors, or we're dealing with the same bog monster. Either way, we have a responsibility to them."

“Wouldn’t our responsibility be to leave them alone?”

“Sure,” he said. “If they were truly free. Every sentient creature needs to know how free or unfree it is. Our responsibility is to freedom, not safety. Let them decide how safe they want to be, once they know the truth.” With that, he emptied his espresso cup with a single toss. Mumbling something under his breath about *liberté*, he nodded, stood and walked out, before I got another question out or even started to stand up.

I remember the first time I used the GPS “in the field,” as I thought of it. We were enjoying a quiet summer morning, the kind of overheated day that you want to avoid, no matter how much you claim to have mastered the humidity. Carol from the tax assessor’s office was down our way with an inquiry about a piece of property. She always prefaced a work question with a half dozen personal questions and at least one “oh don’t get me started” story about a contractor or vice principal or grocery clerk or customer service operator. I grew curious when this went on longer than usual.

“So, Carol,” I began, sputtering off into nothing.

“Hmm? Oh yes,” she said, straightening up some. “I’ve got a case that doesn’t make sense. As far as I can tell, the property owner stopped paying the taxes a number of years ago. We get a check every year from one of the local neighbors, so the taxes are paid up. But I wonder if maybe the owner passed away and we never heard anything.”

“Why would the neighbor pay?” asked one of my colleagues.

“Well,” Carol said, “this kind of thing could happen if the neighbor wants to use the land without outright purchasing it.”

“Squatter?” I asked.

“After a manner of speaking, yes.”

“So,” my colleague said, “what do we do?”

“It’s difficult,” said Carol. “It’s not a crime to pay someone else’s taxes. We need a death certificate and a reason to believe that the neighbor is aware of the owner’s death. Then we need to catch him or her in the act of extracting value from the land.”

“Harvesting, in other words,” I muttered.

“Yes. Usually they can argue that they are just preventing the property from becoming a nuisance, until such time as an owner makes him or herself known. There is a legal provision for an enterprising neighbor to assume ownership after a number of years. It’s called adverse possession.”

“That doesn’t seem right,” stated my coworker.

Carol shrugged as if to say, I don’t make the laws around here, so don’t get me started. After we helped her locate the plot and neighboring farms, she wished us all a bless-ed morning and went back to her office.

I had enough other tasks that I didn’t think further about the case until late afternoon. When I came back to it in my mind, my curiosity got the better of me. I had never been involved as participant or witness in a con of this kind. I disappeared from the office with some vague words about needing a break, after having raided the closet where some surveyor equipment was kept. I thought I had picked up a GPS, but it could as easily have been a measuring laser of some kind. I double-checked the coordinates on the atlas in my car, found the route there from our offices in Hillsborough, and headed out.

I hadn’t seen all that much of the county at that point, mostly the main arteries and the few towns we have. The country roads I followed were all in fine shape, lined by fields, forests, and occasional collections of smaller home site lots. But you could see the disparity carved by the flow of money in our society: palpable poverty, not in exposed ribs and distended bellies like the late-night charity commercials, but in worn roofs, and in faded and half leaning walls. In dilapidated cars in the front yard, some wheel-less on bricks. In solitary figures walking from the local gas station or convenience store, with a bottle in a brown bag. All this contrasted with the nearby three-story brick McMansion

surrounded by a hobbyist farm. Around the next curve, a card table underneath a beach umbrella, with locally grown tomatoes cooking in the afternoon heat. “Leave money in the jar.”

I pulled to the side of road at the appointed location. A young but wilting tobacco crop was laid out in tight, neat rows. Beyond that, just as the satellite photo showed, a stand of spindly, mostly pine trees, about twenty years old, blocking my view of a pond and behind that a turn-around at the end of a driveway. This property’s driveway, we’d found out, ran through the scamming neighbor’s land under a historic easement.

I grabbed the GPS and the surveyor’s vest, and headed for the heart of the property. I skirted the tobacco rows. The sun was behind a thickening afternoon haze, but the heat was unrelenting and I found myself sweating droplets down my forehead and in streaks down my back. I was grateful for the shade of the pine trees, although the cool breeze I’d imagined there was nowhere to be found. Even the faintest bit of air was like a whoosh from an oven. I wasn’t quite yet asking myself what I was after, but I wished I had found another day to become a practical man.

The pond at the end of the property was little more than a swamp, with no outlet. Luminescent green, half empty, thick with scum. I thought it would smell awful, but the air was still enough that I circumnavigated it without a whiff. At the other end there was a small cabin, next to a barren graveled site where manifestly a trailer had stood. “Cabin” was saying too much – it was the size of a backyard storage shed. A perfect for-show homestead.

A nicer camera than my mobile phone would have been smart, but I realized I had not come to capture the place or the moment. I wanted to see it myself, to exchange the physics-free expansiveness of the GIS system for the moment experienced in time and space. It really didn’t matter to me that some petty farmer had figured out how to manipulate the system.

I walked up the driveway to get a view of the farmer’s place, but stopped when I saw what looked like a confederate flag, hanging limp on a sizeable flagpole. There was a pickup truck, too, with confederate battle-flag stickers, carefully symmetric and brand new, gleaming on both sides of the tailgate.

I turned around and hiked back to my car. During the drive back to the office I was both elated and sad, having seen the secret of the place; it felt like a hard-won wisdom, born from the veniality of the world. I don’t know if you have ever felt that way, Brett, where your perspective suddenly broadens and you feel as if you can see the world for what it is, beyond your own experience, further than your eyes should allow you to. That emotion is an illusion, but a powerful one. I was hooked.

The next time came by chance. I was driving home and there was an accident along highway 86, so like others I ducked onto Mt. Sinai Road to get around it. At Turkey Farm Road, I took a right, and realized only after having crossed a single-lane bridge that I had scouted that location during an idle moment just after lunch. I pulled over and turned around, parked near the bridge. The site extended off to the right from the bridge. I had kept the equipment in my trunk, waiting for the right opportunity to return it – where sudden reappearance was likely to stand out more than disappearance – and I grabbed it. This time my heart was racing, because I knew the property was occupied, and because at the heart of it was a small building in the woods, invisible to the satellites but on our plans.

I worked my way alongside the creek, afraid I might have to splash through it if I were spotted. I could see the house through the trees, but the outbuilding was invisible: maybe it had been demolished, just a digital remnant of an earlier time? I wished I had looked up the permits on it. I moved up from the creek to where it had to be. I was almost on top of it when I recognized that the small knob in front of me was an earthen building, like a half-buried bomb shelter. I moved around to the front, saw only a rusty steel door with a lock or handle covered by a little box that itself was fastened by a Masterlock. There was no path back to the house, or just the vaguest outlines of one. What rested in that building? I pictured coming back in the black of a new-moon midnight, with night-vision goggles and a cable cutter, and uncovering a mausoleum of cracked skulls and the possessions of the murdered. The lights go on in

the house, and I've got one chance to escape across the creek. Dogs get my scent at the site of the break-in, and come after me in a hard run. I've got a pistol but nothing that would stop a pack. What then? What then?

I left, sobered by the possibilities, even if they were no more likely than my lying down on top of the shelter and getting hit by lightning. I gave Doreen a big hug when I got home, and she wondered what had gotten into me. Later that night, lying in our bed, I resolved to surprise myself as often as I could, to follow these unwritten stories all the way to ground, wherever they might lead.

The young man surprised himself: "I just had a conversation in bugspeak." The progression had been slow – imperceptible at first – but with weeks and months his comprehension had grown so that he was able to understand simple constructions and say a few coherent things with his artificial set of clicks and vocalizations. He had to admit that the bug followed his bugspeak much better than he did its human speech. Perhaps clicks were easier to approximate than the subtleties of the human voice box; more likely, though, the bug was better equipped through disposition and education to learn a xeno-construction of its own language.

The bug said something like: 'Are you ready to begin?'

Derek: 'Yes, mostly.'

Bug: 'Would you like to do something new?'

Derek: 'Yes, that would be nice.'

Bug: 'Good, today we won't practice new expressions.'

Derek: 'What will we do?'

Bug: 'We should talk.'

Derek: 'What will we talk about?'

Bug: 'Shall we talk about you?'

Derek: 'What do you want to know about me?'

Bug: 'You know that you are on a new world?'

Derek: 'You made that clear a long time ago.'

Bug: 'Do you want to know more about your new world?'

Derek: 'Mostly.'

Bug: 'Do you want to know what we want to know from you?'

Derek: 'Mostly.'

Bug: 'First ask me a question.'

He thought for a while, the kind of pause that occurs in a deep heartfelt argument – here, though not in anger, no less so.

Derek: 'Why are you keeping me in this room?'

Bug: 'Why do you think that we are keeping you here?'

A flush went over his face and a wave of adrenaline through his body. Of course, no one had tried to stop him from exiting, nor had he ever made the effort to do so, at least since their meetings had begun. First thing learned for the morning.

Bug: 'We want to understand from you about your world.'

Derek: 'You have the moving images. Why do you need me?'

Bug: 'We want to understand through questions and your answers.'

Derek: 'You took me from *earth*.' He spoke the last word in English.

Bug: 'It was not right. We do not take intelligent creatures from their worlds any more. That mission left our planet thousands of years ago.'

Derek: 'I am alone.'

Bug: 'You are not alone. This is an interesting world. I am here to help you.'

Derek said in English: "Thank you." He thanked the bug for more than its sentiment.

The bug seemed to recognize the emotional response, and caused the projector to engage. It was a scene from his first days, when he said: “Except that I don’t believe you’re real.” The bug asked why.

Derek said in Bug, with some hesitation: ‘I’m not sure that I am here. I may be back on earth.’ Then: “in a hospital, sick.”

Bug clicked too complexly, or in a different dialect, to its hidden colleagues; Derek didn’t understand a single click. A pause ensued.

Bug: ‘I understand. That is your brain protecting you. That is good.’

Derek: “Am I sick?”

Bug: ‘No, you are a guest in our world. Later, you can come with me.’

The bug exited, and Derek collapsed into a cross-legged sitting position. He hyperventilated for a few minutes, before holding his breath to stop the cycle. Then he was able to look at the hidden door.

Derek spent many hours watching the bug in front of him. The bug had nothing to say about his staring since it wasn’t using its eyes on him. The antennae, he learned, gave only an approximate view of the world, but had advantages: they were unaffected by heat waves (a problem beyond a relatively short distance, given the heat and density of the air), lack of light, or which way the bug happened to be oriented in a room. They processed their sensory information – microwaves, what we call radar – from all directions all along their length. A great richness of information, although at a lower density than a hairy predator’s eyes.

The bugs differentiated fundamentally between creatures with hair or fur like Derek, and a leathery species like themselves. Apparently, the high metabolism implied by thin-skinned biologies led to flightier, less predictable behavior in the individuals. Difficult to manage, difficult to maintain. The ball routine, he was told somewhere along the way, was designed to establish whether the individual was capable of dealing with a strange and threatening world. Derek’s irrational response was paradoxically the right one – if he had retreated to the corner in fear, they would never have coaxed him out of it.

The thickness of bug leather could be inferred from the edges of their concave backs, varying from maybe an inch on his teacher’s back to two or three inches on the largest bug he had seen. The surface of the leather was gray tending toward brown. The saliva of the bug creature had an oil in it that, applied to the leather surface, gave it a sheen and protective layer. He once watched the bug collect a spittle ball in its little black hand and then launch it onto its back. The larger limbs bent back and spread the brownish liquid around its back and down on its sides. There was a musky smell to it.

The black downward-directed bug eyes were an evolutionary gift, but the tiny arms beside the bug face and the grand antennae were civilizatory achievements. If Derek understood properly, the arms had been encoded into the creature’s genetic inheritance many generations ago. The antennae were electro-mechanical enhancements that each bug was given as a very small creature, so that its brain became entwined with the electrical contacts. The antennae themselves could be and were upgraded throughout life.

They were a distasteful species for his mammalian sensibilities, but he could imagine the impression he made. They understood that he had different notions and needs for cleanliness, but their own habits made them inattentive to his bathing needs. His underarms did not smell as he thought they should – earthen bacteria were no doubt eliminated long before the bugs ever joined him in a room – but his body became slippery here and crusty there, his hair matted and disjointed. His skin was reddish and raw all the time from the heat and humidity, and he had to remove the exoskeleton frequently to rub sore spots and give them a rest.

The bugs were, of course, well adapted to this place. Their arms were incredibly strong, keeping the thick body afloat despite the massive gravity; they seemed to be able to lock joints even at less than full extension. The midday uptick in the room’s heat made their leather glisten as the oils loosened up. If they were too warm at any point, they did not show it.

The antennae fascinated Derek. Waves rolled up and down the antennae, sometimes in unison and sometimes slightly out of step, a technique that allowed the bugs to gain more definition through the Doppler effect. The bugs were conscious of the antennae's waviness, but only marginally, since they could not detect the movement of others' antennae and they perceived their own only as pulses of clarity, which generally their minds smoothed out into a consistent image. Thanks to his visual acuity, Derek saw another dimension. When the teacher was distracted, its antennae waved out of phase with each other. Under other circumstances they seemed to betray emotional state. Derek tried to confirm this, but the bug teacher was just confused when he pointed at the antennae and said something like, 'their waving speaks to me.'

Derek still thought "it," but in the course of their exchanges about humans, gender, and sexual reproduction, the bug teacher had let him know that it was a female. Other than size – the teacher confirmed that males were larger – Derek could discern no difference. While asking questions about the diagram of human sexuality floating in a projected image, the bug teacher explained that bugs were androgynous until puberty, at which time the sexual organ at their tail ends migrated upward (female) or downward (male), depending on population-survival needs or, in modern society, the deep-felt druthers of the bug. While the bugs did not wear clothes, they did wear simple covers over both organ locations regardless of their choice. Sexual union was a somewhat gymnastic event where the male maneuvered over the female and they attached briefly. Mammalian ecstasy was alien to the process, at least as far as a sex education clip could show.

He thought "it," but he had grown used to her presence, grown accustomed to her manner in the room, found the rhythm of her antennae soothing. When other bugs joined them, he could not be at ease, for however much he understood that they were always watching, just outside.

Bugspeak was an education. Derek had taken some Spanish, and understood that words were arbitrary sounds for ideas, that any human language had plenty of non-sensical rules arising from centuries-old accretions. Strong verbs? To what end? But nothing in his experience prepared him for this language. Not that it was intricate: it had been stripped of its non-sensicality, apparently thousands of years prior, so that there were precious few rules to learn beyond vocabulary and word types. Sentence structure came across as consistent and logical, a natural and even aesthetically pleasing framework. But the structure was fundamentally unearthly.

The object of the sentence was always at the core. An action upon the object was prepended to the object like a verbal phrase: "the thrown ball" or "the to-be-thrown ball." What we understand as the subject of a sentence – the actor – was found only in the passive construction: "the by me thrown ball." The sentence could be varied and extended from there in different ways, but within the limits of a sensibility that put the object at the end of a short sentence, or in the middle of a lengthier one: "the by me expertly thrown ball working its way to you, hitting with a loud thud."

Derek did not notice the significance for quite a while. The "See Jane run" sentences that he learned at first did not seem different from our own, despite the lack of inflection on the verb, with a slight hook to the number of the object ("thrown" gets an additional *thwack*, depending on its final sound, if it is followed by balls instead of ball; this was subtle and didn't concern him). But when he tried to ask why not I throw / he throws, the bug teacher explained that where English centers around "gerrrgz" (verbs) bugspeak is predicated on "dsinnngz" (things). His teacher: You see a universe of actions; we see one of things.

Derek had shrugged at the time. But sitting with his eyes glued on the wall before him he felt keenly how different the world was for the bugs and him. The linguistic differences were not by chance. Earth mammals were creatures of precipitous action, impulse, rapid mental feedback loops (both good and bad). The bugs – unfairly, maybe – he saw as slow moving but deadly effective and efficient

chameleons, whose projectile tongues were replaced by a technological prowess that he could only guess at. Beyond this room, was he seen as prey? An inanimate dumb object? A zoo animal or pet?

He could not lose the nagging thought still that through this wall was a portal to either madness or release. He knew he would have to take those steps soon. He just hoped he would not take them alone.

When the door opened that afternoon, no one entered. This is my cue, he thought. Then a vehicle slid in, like a plastic disk gliding on ice, only shaped more like a motorbike frame floating on air. He recognized that this was a human-friendly version of the discs he had seen bugs riding. He stood up and lifted his leg over the device, leaned forward and settled in. There were resting spots for both his knees/shins and his elbows/forearms. Controls were nestled where his hands came to rest. He moved something like a joystick on the right and a small lever on the left, with x-y and z axial movement respectively. With a single puff of unchecked forward acceleration, he floated out the opening into the darkness. It was immediately illuminated in a black light emanating from his vehicle's single headlight.

The space was otherwise mostly dark, with deep red hues at specific locations. He had guessed that his eyes and the bugs were not on the exact same frequencies, and he supposed that his bike's light was probably designed to leave the natives undisturbed. Bugs were scattered throughout a tall cavern hewn from beige-reddish rock, some at the red-glowing spots, others floating at various altitudes. With some awkwardness Derek caused his vehicle to rotate 180° and he could see a metallic structure atop the large, weakly glowing box that had been his home for so many months. The structure had pipes and hoses of all sizes coming and going, with silvery boxes and illuminated electronics. No different than a containment device in a lab.

He rotated again, hoping to see his teacher. If she was there, he could not pick her out. No bug made an effort to stand out or indicate to him that he was expected. His disappointment rose, even as he realized that he was being tested again, measured, evaluated, judged. He could jump off the bike and go back into the illuminated box. He cursed under his breath and manipulated the controls. He assumed the exit from the chamber would be at the still dark far end, and so he worked his way there, but as he approached, he could see no exit there, just more wall. When he glided up to it, he stared for a while at the rock (with a small bump against it), and decided that the rough surface was carefully cultivated to look that way. If it was really rock or something else, he wasn't sure.

He rose up to the ceiling, didn't find an exit there either. Maybe it was hidden, as his wall door had been. He lowered his vehicle and went back to the door to his own chamber. Two of the floating bugs who had seemed so indifferent to his presence moved suddenly out of his way, as if he were exuding an invisible force field – perhaps that was a feature of these vehicles. The now closed door had no obvious markings from the outside. Perhaps there were signs in a range of light invisible to him, or perhaps the controls were manipulated by radar.

He felt around his controls for any additional ones. Then he looked down at the area beneath his torso, where he expected the gas tank to be. He brought an arm to bear and put his hand into what became a mesh dissolving in his fingers. Beneath the mesh he felt various small items. One stood out: glass frames. He brought these up and placed them on his nose and ears, and looked around. Nothing different. He felt around the frame for an on-switch, but feeling small protuberances he realized that these were designed not simply to rest on his face. He gave it a push backwards and could feel pinpricks above his ears, into the bridge of his nose, and something slithering onto his eyes, which reflexively made to close but could not. A quick shock on his eyes made him twitch. Then he saw an image like the invisible projector unfold before his eyes, and he could see the room in overlay: mostly still the visible, but now also laid out in sparkly low-res with outlined shapes, markers and all sorts of information about the bugs around him, in alien symbology.

Whatever was covering his eyes kept them moist, but his lids were going crazy. He decided he had to get the glasses off, but he tried first to scan the walls for the door and opener. Nothing stood out. Just

before his fingers reached the frame, he realized that a set of information followed his eyes as they scanned, and the information seemed to change as he reached into his field of view. He was able to use his hand to manipulate that information – he moved his fingers until something happened. He hoped his tenders would suppress any undesired effects. A door opened in the floor of the chamber, and floating arrow shapes pointed him in that direction. He decided he could keep the glasses on for a while longer.

He eased his vehicle down toward the opening. It seemed like a swift body of water was below, with occasional glimmers and shapes gliding by. He looked around; nothing had changed in this chamber. He threw the lever down and descended with a lurch.

Sudden acceleration caught him off guard, caused him to lean and the vehicle to careen to the right. An enormous invisible balloon collided with him and sent his vehicle off in the other direction, as a stream of bugs passed by on his right. He almost fell off his vehicle, downward to he knew not where, but he was able to balance himself again. Even though the passageway was dark, his glasses outlined enough detail to show him that he was in a multi-laned, multi-leveled stream of personal vehicles – all bug driven, as far as he could see. The stream was differential, faster in the middle and slower as you moved outward. At the edges there seemed to be a merging area where speeds were almost nil; his precipitous descent had moved him right through the merge zone. He figured, based on bugs at the edge, that his speed was now approaching 50 mph; the bugs in the middle area seemed to be going at least twice as fast. There was no head wind, leaving an eerie silence, with odd empty tones like echoes coming from the walls, but whose sources he couldn't place.

When he felt comfortable with his place in the stream, he tried to figure out his next step using his headset. The speed and maybe location seemed to be indicated in some rapidly changing and flashing figures, but he still had no useful understanding. He put his hand out and tried to manipulate the items that had worked to open the door. They bolded and flashed as he would have expected, but nothing indicated a success of any kind. Nothing like a map.

After accepting that he was hopelessly lost and helpless, he shouted (in Bug) to the stream: 'Click-Cluck, your needed help!' Nothing happened again. He waited another five minutes, then shouted again. Another three. Another two. One. Finally he was shouting as loud and as fast as he could.

After ten minutes, he stopped speaking. The passageway seemed to trail off into infinity, and he resigned himself to ride it the whole way. He tried to relax as much as he could without risking another accident.

Another twenty-some minutes passed. A voice came at him from in front of the motorbike, always just ahead, Click-Cluck's voice: 'Where are you, Derek (Derrrkhh)?'

Derek: 'I don't know.' (That unknown fact.) Then in English: "I'm on the motorbike in a highway somewhere."

Click-Cluck: "Bike with motor," 'that is what you have?'

Derek: 'Yes, it was brought to my room.'

Click-Cluck: 'You must get off the highway.'

Derek: 'How?'

Click-Cluck: 'Go to the edge. I will find you.'

Derek maneuvered up, felt himself slow, watched as the bug streams flowed around him and finally beneath him. Eventually, he was studying the rock-like surface above him, in feigned interest, to keep from watching the dizzying stream. Another several minutes passed, and he was bumped from behind. It was not Click-Cluck, and he wanted to turn his vehicle around to bump back. But then: 'Derek, go with Clug-Cluk-Tock.' The bug moved ahead and guided him back into the artery.

Barry picked me up at my house. I tried to dissuade him, but he convinced me that this was the most convenient course of action and indirectly that I was being duplicitous or elitist or just a lousy friend if I asked him not to. He rang the doorbell and though I was standing at the door, your mother came to see

who was there. Barry leaned in past me and introduced himself to her. There was an awkward moment when he paused to let Doreen say something about hearing so much about him, during which she looked at me with a mixture of suspicion and bemusement. “Oh really?” she said to what Barry continued with, some self-serving statement about the fourth estate and freedom of speech. Not a word about tabloids, thankfully.

Barry and Doreen conspired to get us into seats in the living room. They talked a bit about a mutual interest in educating the masses; I waited for the word “monster” to drop. Instead they started discussing industrial-age philosophers.

“It certainly is refreshing,” Barry said, “to find someone with your interests.”

Doreen glanced at me with that same bemused expression. “I’m sure you’ve met all sorts of people who know more than I.” Then she smiled at him, in thanks for the sentiment.

“I will never understand,” he said ponderously, “what passes for wisdom in this university town.”

I jumped in: “Now you’re quoting Steely Dan?”

He looked at me as at an unruly pet you have to curb. I decided not to decode the *Naked Lunch* referent, despite my first impulse. Doreen had a half-distracted look and seemed to be trying to place the line.

“We may rest assured,” quoth Barry, “that mankind will either believe *they know not wherefore*, or will not know what to believe. Few are those who ever attain to that state of rational and independent conviction which true knowledge can produce out of the midst of doubt.”

“Emerson?” asked Doreen.

“De Tocqueville. From Emerson we have: ‘Society is always taken by surprise at any new example of common sense.’”

Doreen cleared her throat and recited: “Ess gheebt kinah ricktigis layben im fallshen.”

Barry: “Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*. There is no proper life in a false one.”

Now, mind you, Brett, you’ve got to recognize this kind of exchange for the parlor game it is. Some people have a stomach or goût for it, some don’t. I was ready to smack Barry at the back of the head, afraid we’d miss my appointment, afraid the monster would make its conversational appearance, maybe even more afraid that they would start talking about me through their quotations.

They managed another round of harmless syntagms, but then Doreen began to flag and Barry gracefully led us back to the door. Doreen mentioned needing to finish something up, and left us there. Barry smiled at me in a conspiratorial way but didn’t say a word. We got into his car and headed off to Pittsboro.

“Your bog monster,” Barry said of a sudden, “is a perfect expression of Romanticism. Think of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.”

I let out my usual “what?” and had no further retort.

As he raced down Fordham Blvd., Barry continued: “Goethe himself penned a poem about a vampire. The German Romantics, notably the researchers you know as the Brothers Grimm, were engaged in nothing if not pinpointing what we fear.”

“I’ve never read that Bigfoot fairytale in their book.”

“Think about the giants.”

“That’s a stretch. Besides, nobody I know has sleepless nights because of the bog monster.”

“No, of course not,” Barry said, sounding like a parent who has just realized how long their car trip could drag on. “It’s not the fears that we can name; it’s the nameless fears. The bog monster is a cipher for what is unnamed.”

“So – you’re saying you don’t believe after all? It’s just the boogeyman?”

“Who says even our nameless fears aren’t real?”

“You’re the one who started with fairytales.”

Barry accelerated around a corner and I felt myself compress against the door and wished I had locked it. It seemed a bit silly to lean over to do so now.

“The study of folklore and fairytales is about extracting the truth from human projections. Lies and prevarications have their own relationship to the truth; nothing is meaningless.”

I adjusted myself in my seat and looked out the window. “Pretty profound for a tabloid reporter.”

“Au-ouch,” he said, sounding hurt. “I suppose everything you do betters humankind. I know you work for the public good, but seriously. How much of what you do is feeding the beast – bettering the system that collects taxes so that you can collect more taxes, so that you can better the system?”

“Right,” I said.

We drove on in silence. It took about 15 minutes to enter Pittsboro. Barry maneuvered us through a few intersections onto ever smaller streets. This being Chatham County, I had no idea where we were. The house was nondescript, a two-story steep-roofed box with deep red brick accents and something like a gravel parking lot in the front. A small hand-painted though still graceful sign announced their business and highlighted the proprietors.

We rang the bell and Barbara appeared at the door, dressed in a simple frock with an apron over it. “Hello, Barry,” she said formally. “Welcome, Bog Monster –”

Barry jumped in: “You’ll find him more responsive if you use John.”

“John, Bog Monster of Chapel Hill, welcome.” Barbara smiled broadly – I think you might know and sympathize, Brett, when I say that her unfettered smile felt like a sun ray of joy, a generic affirmation of our mutual humanness but a declaration, too, from her to me, though I had no reason to believe it was anything more than just a friendly smile.

She had wide, prominent lips, pulled against not perfectly white but straight and a little oversized teeth. The smile matched her hair in its unmeasured ease. Her hair was unbrushed, a bit unkempt, but with some gray highlights. It balanced well against her big brown eyes and deep white freckled skin. Her eyes were subtly outlined by mascara, but otherwise her face was unmade, a contrast that made her eyes seem all the larger, the gaze all the more penetrating. A few glittery strands of narrow ribbon in her hair stayed just out of focus, a peripheral tease.

Barbara had pushed her screen door wide open and Barry took it. I followed her in. We went into a living room that was reconfigured as a small retail outlet, with all the booth items plus a few racks of books and a health food corner. When Barry came in, she said: “Barry, you can stay here or there.” She pointed to a small antechamber on the other side of the entranceway, with more bookshelves, a couple chairs and a small coffee table with magazines. She used her index finger to gesture to me to follow her, which seemed clichéd but not without old-school charm, meant to separate me from whatever presumption Barry rode in on.

I followed her through another room that had a couch and a closed entertainment-center cabinet – a momentary overlap of commercial and private lives, though the latter established its precedence through a wall full of paintings and wall hangings. We entered a room that had two small roll-top desks, a couch and two wooden chairs facing each other. The windows were well shaded in white and deep red, and the furniture for the most part had a heavy, old-world feel. Candles – tall, short fat and small votive varieties – covered the horizontal surfaces, though the room was mostly lit by two upward-facing halogen lamps placed in opposite corners. They cast heavy shadows throughout the room and yet made it seem taller, more substantial.

“I’ll be just a moment,” she said. She looked over her shoulder to smile at me, and then she went through another door.

I felt it immediately, as soon as she shut the door. I was not alone in that room; Doreen loomed in the corner, no longer bemused, but still willed to allow me to play out the line for my noose. Though I could counter that this whole thing was innocent – the very definition of it, through its naïve spiritualism – Doreen shook her head, not for a moment willing to acknowledge the pretext. This young woman, she

said. Hey, I replied, she – But Doreen cut me off: She nothing! You and your projections. She is getting paid, that’s all. The fact that she chooses to lead you on with this little-lost-girl-as-spiritual-medium routine doesn’t speak well for her, but certainly does not unburden you. – Hey, I answered, you act all innocent, but –

She did not take the bait. This was the point at which she always became mum, both in life and in my internal dialogs. She saw where I was going, to a challenge and a question that she had resolved never to answer, never to broach.

Brett, I think you’re old enough to understand, and you may even empathize, how it happens that two people can face each other over a question that has become an impossible set of words, excised from speech like a blasphemy, equally made meaningless by the conventions of day-to-day living, but always threatening to burst forth like a gash in reality that, once heard and believed, would never heal. The impossible words: “Have you been unfaithful?”

Sure, there are formalistic answers like “that depends on the definition of been.” But outside a sympathetic court of law no one can hang their defense on so flimsy a reed, especially when your interlocutor is prosecutor, witness and judge all in one. We are not talking about the conditional confessions – “I wanted to, I would have” – they are the special case, deserving of appellate reflection and careful reasoning. The majority of cases are open and shut. There are many denials, and sometimes the court falls short of justice for the lack of evidence. In our case the DA had chosen not to prosecute. The witness had to live with the stories untold; the judge could not make findings of fact or rule on mitigating factors. Unsatisfactory all around, not least for the accused.

I know Doreen would have liked nothing more than to unburden herself. I don’t know how it began, or how it ended. I can remember the day I first told myself that something was going on, and I can remember the day we cried together over I knew not what. It was no more than a couple months. There was so much going on that year that we never talked about, even after we were reconciled in ways that both of us recognized as such. She steered us away from conversation where normally she would insist that we talk – damning evidence – but I could tell that it hurt her to do so. Some years before at a dinner party, a group of us had discussed cheating, and she had listed the psychosocial reasons why confessing served no one. “I would never confess,” she concluded, “and that would be my punishment.”

Now, mind you, the main justification for not telling me is that I could not forgive her. And yet I am to forgive that she does not tell me? Somehow that seems like a mistaken kindness and at such a juncture a too great price. I know the assumption is that the deceived partner does not know and that what he or she does not know cannot harm their relationship. But exactly that fails the test of reasonability. We’re very few of us sociopaths – none of the rest lies so well and hides frustration, disappointment and distraction so completely that the reality remains completely hidden.

Yes, Brett, I am speculating. But only because I never chose to present the evidence and Doreen never confessed. The details are all that she kept from me.

She waited in that corner for Barbara’s return, still defiant. The wait was a bit too long, as if Barbara had chosen to finish a chore with this opportunity, but when she returned she was all sunshine and ready to go. She had changed into a flowing skirt and loose muslin top with a camisole outlined beneath. She had tied her hair back with a red bandana. In her hands were a small handwritten book and a digital recorder.

“All right, John,” she said, the first time I hadn’t heard something of a taunt in her voice. She motioned me into one of the wooden chairs, and she sat in the other. She started the recorder and opened the book and wrote a few words. Then she held out her right hand. “Remind me who you are.”

I sat motionless until it hit me that she wanted my palm, and I leaned forward so that she could pull it back to her. She eyed it from a distance. “You are a strong individual,” she said, seemingly to herself, “but it is easy to miss that – I can see it in your lifeline. You may be misunderstood, most of all, by those who love you, because they see the side of you that is most apt to question itself.... And look, the bog

monster has its own line.” She smiled at me, and lifted my hand up before my face. She scooted forward and reached around the palm with two fingers. She deftly felt for lines on my hand and stopped with her fingers at either end of a crease in my palm. “This line isn’t supposed to be, or if it is, it should be connected with that line. Do you see it?” I said yes. “This line indicates a great division in a life – dueling personalities, or a great shock and disappointment.”

She put my hand down, and started to do stretches with her neck and shoulders. “All right, it’s time to relax. Do whatever it is that you might do to relax in a chair.” She saw my mouth begin to move, and anticipated: “Except slouch.”

I guffawed just for an instant, because that is exactly what I was going to say. Maybe it’s a universal joke, but that affected me. I did some neck stretches myself.

“John, I need to hold your hands but I need you to keep your hands loose when I do. I will look into your eyes – in fact, I will be staring into your eyes – but you can blink as much as you want, and if you find it strange or awkward, please feel free to look away. Okay?”

She took up my hands in hers, and I tried to keep my arms and hands as loose as possible, probably not what she meant (they can weigh a great deal) but she didn’t say a word.

Her eyes moved from one of my eyes to the other, as if looking for an affirmation or confirmation, but I could tell she was looking for something else, something behind my eyes and expression. After a short while, her eyes seemed to glaze; she wasn’t seeing me see her at all. Her gaze stayed on me for three minutes, which was an unbelievable amount of time to be that close, silent and in each other’s face.

“John?” she asked as if calling, as if I had been hypnotized and gone deep into myself.

“Yes,” I said, hoarsely and quietly, and my voice did feel a bit disembodied.

“I want you to concentrate on something. It helps me when I try to sense your aura.”

“Sure,” I said, a concession that she sensed. She didn’t reply. Then I added: “I would be happy to.”

“Concentrate on your earliest love.”

We were still eye-to-eye – she must have seen my disbelieving reaction, but she didn’t let on.

“Okay,” I said, when I could say it with some conviction.

“Your earliest love. What she or he looked like, what you did, how you felt.”

“All right.” After a few moments, I settled on the memory and I felt an urge to close my eyes, but the emerging image cleared my vision without doing so. Then Barbara gave my hands a little squeeze and slowly let them down to rest on my legs. She held hers up as if she wanted to catch a three-foot beach ball. Nothing else changed.

Brett, here’s the memory. Let’s call it the red-shoe incident. I can see myself in gym class. Back in the day, we would go to large locker rooms and change into our gym clothes, so I was dressed in shorts, tee shirt and converse basketball high-tops. Our gym teacher was stereotypical, a coach in spirit but a self-satisfied time-server who had moved into mental cruise control years before. This was “country dancing” week, which brought the boys and the girls together. The girls’ gym teacher took the lead. All right, she was saying, we’re going to practice dancing with a partner. I want all the girls to take a shoe off and put it in the middle of the gym. The boys will get a shoe from the middle, then find their partner.

The process of putting shoes in the middle lasted two minutes, plenty of time for the boys to strategize. You wanted to be with a partner who was attractive, maybe not so much because you cared who was on the other end of a dosado but because you didn’t want to see the other joe smiling at you with a sense of superiority. It didn’t take long for everyone to see the prime strategy: there in the middle of sixty or seventy white, blue and black shoes was a single red shoe. The shoe belonged to Amy. She was attractive and smart, and a charmer in her own way, though not the beauty of the class, or the girl you’d pick out to gloat over. But she was well liked, and so much above the average that that red shoe shone like a beacon to all our eyes.

Go, the teacher said. Instantly there was a pile-on in the middle of the room. I have no recollection of who came away with the shoe. What I remember – what I can see today as if I stand there – is not moving and looking over at Amy, seeing her blush when someone emerged victorious. She looked wide-eyed at her friends, and put her hand to her mouth in sudden realization of what was happening for the cause of her shoe. I waited for her to show more shock from this dog-eat-dog show, but she was more than just a little bit pleased by it all.

There I am, looking at her and realizing that I want what everyone else wants, but not because of the red shoe in the middle of the floor. I want to be with her because of who she is, an uncanny realization. I wish I could shout it but I'm shut inside myself.

I don't know her all that well. Or rather I do, as much as I know myself, as much as I understand why I do the things I do. I like to tease her when we talk – there's no surer sign of a boy's interest – and she is suitably demure and quick with an inviting repartee....

I can feel the melancholy that was so common to me back then, while I walk to the middle to grab one of the leftover shoes (hopefully not too many sizes larger than those that went first). I lean over and grab a shoe, and wander among the girls who have been unclaimed so far. My mind aches with a deep encompassing sadness, but even more so with longing for a new kind of balance. My own sense of my importance doesn't begin to stop the pain. I walk by Amy, kneeling to tie her shoe, and proximity and distance seem like a magic formula that I cannot unravel within my own mind. If I could just reach out and touch her hand, I know I could ground the equation and understand.

Derek awoke. The room was utterly dark, until he was able to find his glasses. Several areas were lit up with bug information, but he couldn't tell much about them. He was lying on a perfectly round bed; when he stretched his legs, they extended off by two feet. The ceiling was about 4 feet. He was in his exoskeleton, still powered. Slowly, the day before was coming back to him: the decisions, the panic, the guide, the reuniting, a long slow conversation in which he realized how little he understood about bug world. He remembered slowly fading under Click-Cluck's explanations, and she finally directed him to this room. He had no idea what time it was – he still didn't know much more about what time meant for them.

He understood enough to know that light, light visible to him, was more the exception than the rule. Using the glasses' sensors, he located the door he had entered, and he crawled out. The common space beyond the door was about 8 feet high, so he was able to stand up. He did a full body stretch and yawned. That's when he noticed Clug-Cluk-Tock in the corner, perhaps asleep, but probably there on guard duty. Derek sat down cross-legged and rubbed his face while considering where he was.

'You made a mistake,' Click-Cluck had told him. 'You were meant to panic and hurt yourself. – You need to understand that you are not without enemies.'

'Enemies?' Derek needed the word explained, and some examples from earth history sufficed. 'But why? What have I done?'

Click-Cluck seemed disturbed by this innocence. 'Not what you have done – who you are. I need to help you understand. For the moment, consider that our civilization is old, very old by earth measures, but that even a stable, long-lived civilization such as ours undergoes changes. Where galactic exploration was once one of our crowning achievements, we are now not much interested in the knowledge that such exploration brings. In fact, there are those who oppose the presence of exo-species, not so much because it is wrong to take specimens or because they are afraid of biological contamination. They fear the cultural influence. They would keep all evidence of other biospheres locked up, and they would destroy all living evidence.'

'I am living evidence?' Derek asked, to make sure he understood. Then: 'What other living evidence do you have?'

'We will discuss that at another time,' said Click-Cluck.

All right, thought Derek, then the natural question: “Am I going to be killed?”

‘No, it is not our way to kill other living creatures – unless extensive procedures are followed. You are safe, I think, from anyone but yourself. Consider the charged ball. You were supposed to flee the ball and cower in the corner of your room until the fear and lack of stimulation made your warm-blooded brain go crazy. We’ve seen it happen in similar species. Yesterday’s test was designed to make you go over the edge and do something that would either injure you, or make you distrust us. If you were content to stay in your room, no one would bother with you. But when you claim your rights as a sentient being, you become a problem for the exophobes.’

“Why did you let them do that to me yesterday?”

‘It was carefully orchestrated; we had no knowledge... It would be foolish to imagine that in the future you won’t find yourself in a similar situation. You will have to save yourself again.’

“I didn’t save myself this time. You did.”

‘You seem not to understand the test that you passed with the ball, Derek. You would be wise to think more about this. The sign of intelligence that we were looking for was not the ability to reason through to why we did what we were doing, because we could hide our motivation behind a hundred subterfuges. The intelligence you needed to display was the willingness to risk everything for your innate rights as an aware being.’

“John?”

“Yes.”

“I find it works better if your eyes are open,” she said, and gave me a wide smile when I opened my eyes. I hadn’t even realized I’d closed them. It was an embarrassing moment, not least because I could tell that her smile encompassed a little chuckle. Still, the genuine article – a joyful smile – is hard to resist. “Now I would like you to think about your first memory. You are no bigger than a toddler or a woddler. There are few words associated with this memory. It may be a smell, or a flash of recognition, or something you did every day. Don’t tell me it – I don’t need to know.”

I found myself looking into her eyes, wondering if they were seeing me, or the aura, or were concentrating on something on the wall behind me, or maybe they were disconnected from the brain while it was busy making a shopping list.... From this distance I could see the smallest details of the irises of her eyes: symmetric brown rays emanating from the pupil, with hints of green played off by the black mascara on her lids. The pupils were over-large in that light, giving a wide-eyed effect to her face, almost anime-like.

I was slowly drawn into my imagination. I am wandering the house, crying, maybe three or four years old, looking for my mother, upset about something. It seems that I’ve been crying for a few minutes; my eyes are quite damp, including the lashes. I stop suddenly. Why am I crying? What do I hope to get from my mother? I couldn’t tell you – you can imagine that the memory is vague almost beyond recognition. But as I moved back into that time I could see one thing clearly: the disproportionality of everything. I have so little control over my body, and the house intimidates me from top to bottom. There are doors and drawers and sliders and objects all around me that are too heavy, too tall and awkward for me. The ceiling vaults above like a cathedral. The whole environment dwarfs, disarms me. We are not talking about magnitudes of difference – just three or four times difference – and yet I feel like I might as well be imprisoned.

I realize with a sudden and surprising certainty that I am me and that I am crying for my mother because that’s what I do when I want something, whether I know what that something is or not. But I am me, I think. I stop crying, and decide that I could also *not* cry for her. I wander off to do something else.

Barbara’s eyes were staring at me or through me. I didn’t know if I should ahem or cough or say something, afraid that I might break her concentration on the beach-ball aura wrapped around me. Idiot, I thought, and raised my eyebrows: if she was seeing me, she ought to recognize that. I waited half a

minute and was about to say something, when she said without otherwise moving a muscle: “I know you’re done; just hang on.”

That minute had me twitching because I didn’t want to go wandering in my mind while I was looking at her, and I didn’t think I should move. The enforced stillness manifested itself as an itch all over.

Then she relaxed, took up her notebook and started making keyword notes. I couldn’t tell what she was writing – either she was a doctor in a former life or a secretary specializing in shorthand.

“Okay,” she said, as I took to scratching my various itches. “That was interesting. I should have guessed that your struggle between need and independence would go so far back....”

I was dumbfounded. I thought: Oh my God, what could the odds be on that. (Another voice was saying, why in the world would you think yourself anything other than typical.)

A small, satisfied smile formed on her face. “Just a couple more. First I want you to imagine the moment of your happiest success. I don’t mean the time you were happiest. I mean the moment when you felt most successful in life. Then we’ll look at the deepest downer.... Okay,” she shook herself and reset her arms in the position to accept my ethereal globe.

Again the eyes. The proximity had meanwhile become intimacy, artificial in the extreme, but undeniable as we sat face to face. The staring was easier. I saw what she was doing: staring the way a cat does, concentrating not on a spot but bringing in the whole field of vision. Seeing, and not seeing. Cats blend out the motionless and wait to see the movement; I pictured her doing the same with the motion of my aura.

Most successful? I can remember the day when Doreen and I decided to move to Chapel Hill: We are sitting at the dining table, the heavy chestnut one we still have, the sky outside reddening in the way desert skies do, and Doreen is listening to me describe the places I had visited, the work environment, the job offer. It was just one offer, but you may know the feeling, Brett – and if you don’t now, you will – that one success feels exactly like the first step in multiple successes. Doreen is cautious about my enthusiasm, but seems to be loosening up, accepting that this may just be the solution we were looking for. We have a bottle of red wine open, and both have imbibed a fair amount. You are in the family room, playing. Finally, Doreen says, that sounds wonderful, and she gets up and comes over to me and kisses me. She may have said something about providing for the family, but it doesn’t matter. I feel on the top of the world.

I moved my head slightly as I focused on her, and I hoped that Barbara would notice. She was as impassive as ever, and maybe even slightly more intent. Another silent minute. “Thanks for being patient,” she said, as she relaxed and leaned over to make more cryptic notes.

I felt like asking, “What do you see?” But I was afraid of getting a perfunctory reaction and an even more businesslike manner from her. Maybe there would be a moment when it would make sense. I carried through an exaggerated stretch to occupy myself.

“All right,” she said, expressed as if she didn’t need to elaborate. When I looked lost, she added: “Now I would like to have you remember your biggest career downer.” She settled herself in, and then said: “I don’t want you to wallow in it. It’s just a visit. Okay, let’s go.”

I stared straight into her eyes; if she noticed the intensity she wasn’t letting on. All right, I thought, I know exactly the day, the time, the place. Well, the place is vague, but I’m sitting in front of a large red-stained desk. Across from me is my supervisor in Arizona, with whom I had tussled over employee issues since becoming an acting manager under him. He looks at me with a combination of a smile and a sneer, and then opens his mouth widely, as if to shout instructions to a large team or to cry a lament. Neither comes out. “The commissioners and I have decided,” he says, “not to offer you the manager position. We are going to reconfigure the manager and assistant positions, and someone with different skills will be needed in both positions. We are moving you back to your old job.” I am dumbfounded. – He explains to me that I’ll be reporting to person X, his management protégé from another division. Not

one word about how he had as much as promised me the promotion. His solemn, challenging look is telling me: You've got no cards here; you've been outmaneuvered in every way. I know he's waiting for me to lose it and sink whatever future I may have in the department, but I still can't speak. I can't imagine that this is the man I once considered a mentor, now revealed to me as a cruel, venal, conniving S.O.B. I can't understand how wrong I was. I can't see my future. I can't see Doreen. It's all blank.

This time Barbara was waiting for me. I guess the angry aura is less interesting. Her smile was toned down, as if she was letting this episode pass discreetly. "Okay," she said.

I didn't say anything, even though the anger was still there, animating my tongue, making me want to burst out with something, anything.

"We're done with that, John," she said, taking up her little notebook, "I spend so much time on the aura because it's the most interesting window on the soul." She paused. "But you don't believe in the soul, do you?"

"Not really," I said, although I responded in my mind: I don't believe in the soul as a commodity, but I'm not willing to cede the concept altogether to those who would market it.

"That's all right," she said, with a hint of womanly comforting. "You don't have to believe in aura, either. I hope you listen to what I say, read what I am going to send you, and think about it. Nothing can make a difference in your life if you can't make sense of it for yourself. I know you'll have more than one laugh, you and Barry" – a reference I was not happy to hear – "but I hope you let things resonate within you."

"All right," I ventured.

She searched my eyes one last time, then looked out the curtained window. "Every living thing has an aura, John. It is partly a result of the physical energy of the organism – the human body itself puts out about 100 watts at any moment. But it is also psychic energy, the stuff of our real selves, a substance of its own kind. Because it cannot be described in physical terms we have lost track of it, but you can see signs of it yourself, if you're only willing." She looked back at me. "Like when an infant recognizes faces in the first few minutes of life. Like when you look at a painting of a jungle and immediately see hidden eyes peering out at you. You probably would ascribe all that to evolutionary biology: a baby needs to recognize its mother; a hunter or gatherer needs to see dangers. But these little miracles also bear witness to a non-physical reality. We gravitate to the energy of life; all animals do. We can see this energy for itself when the world is magical for us, which means for most of us when we are very young. Not yet blinded by the jeering rationality we impose on each other." She paused and saw that I wanted to ask a question. I was looking to get her off the soapbox.

"Is that what you do – regress so you can see psychic energy again?"

"I wish, John," she said and reached out with a hand to touch my knee. "I wish that I could. I use my peripheral vision as best I can to see what I can't see."

"Sounds paradoxical."

"We are actually quite attuned to see things at the edge of perception. A sudden movement at the edge of your vision. An odd sense that something is out of place, but when you stare at it you see nothing. Think again about the fact that we see faces everywhere – remember the picture of the face on the surface of Mars? What is it that makes us perceive meaning where our rational minds expect none? Our non-conscious minds are constantly connecting us to things over which we have no analytic control. We have sympathy with life itself. Have you ever seen on a science show the near hopeless struggle of spermatozoa? Have you felt the kinship – I don't mean because you are a male. Life energy animates the universe around us. Psychic energy illuminates our higher being. With my husband's help, I've learned to look for that energy at the edges of life and at the edges of my vision, in what I cannot see."

"Does aura have a color?"

“No, I don’t see a color; it’s more an intensity, a potential. My husband can actually distinguish 7 levels of aura, with colors and spectra. We have both also learned to feel aura with our hands. What I see – I can’t explain it to you, in the same way I can’t explain what attracted me to your presence when we first met, or why I know when someone is lying and leading me on, or what someone’s deepest, most cherished dream is.”

All right, I thought, okay, for argument’s sake. (I recalled later that she didn’t blink when she stared, drying her eyes out and probably causing a halo effect.)

“I ask my clients to remember key events in their life to get a baseline and range,” she said. “The changes that accompany memories pretty reliably reveal the state of your aura.”

“What can you say about mine?”

She smiled. “All right. Let’s see.” She read from her notebook. “Your aura is healthy, shiny and pulsing in the way we like to see. There are only a few problems. First, there’s something missing in your psychic energy because of your general level of anxiety. I notice it as a weakness in the aura right at your forehead” – for emphasis she touched two fingers on my forehead – “A brain can easily lose its synchronization with the body’s energy. But we have exercises for getting that back on track. Second, you have a tendency to transfix on the past. It was very clear with your first love. You moved too easily back in time; even your aura began to timeshift. This is fine as an exercise, but can sap your energy over time. When I treat someone, I work with him or her to understand why they have a preoccupation with the past, and once we identify the reasons for it, there are a few ways to work through it. Third, anger. Really, John, you need to begin to understand what animates you when you’re frustrated. It’s not healthy. And I’m not referring to your blood pressure or your heart. We’re talking about your eternal soul. You do not want to let hate poison it.” She suffered the slightest hint of a shudder before she looked up, smiled as punctuation, and laid the notebook aside.

“Last few things,” she pulled out a printed sheet of paper and attached it to a clipboard. “If you would fill this out as best you can, I’ll consult some reliable astrology charts and analyze your writing. And now – ” She produced an ink pad and reached for my hand. I gave it to her with some reluctance, and she pressed it into the pad, then spread it sideways over another sheet of paper she laid upon her thigh. She said matter-of-factly: “A rounded surface produces a better full-hand print than a flat one.”

I can’t deny, Brett, that I was affected by all this – the proximity, the hint of clairvoyance, the promises of help, the expression of interest. She talked slowly, even moved slowly, as if in recognition of the fact that we had entered a space where I felt unsure, out of control. She took up her materials, leaving the sheet I was to fill out, and stood: “Please fill out the form once I’ve gone – there is usually some level of interference if I’m in the room – and then, if you would be so kind, fill out the guestbook at the entrance. There are some customary amounts indicated there; we have a sliding scale, but we ask those who can afford it to help with our work.” Short smile and a hint of a curtsy. “Any questions?”

There were a lot of things I wanted to say, not all appropriate, but nothing like a proposition. I wanted to know more about this thing that separated us, this supposed ability, this self-assurance at the fringe of society. But there was another question, which she anticipated after I gently shook my head. “Maybe next time,” she said, “we can get to know that monster.” I didn’t speak. “I know you think it can’t exist, but there is just so much in this world that we can’t comprehend with our analytic brains. I can feel his being out there, and I know you have some connection to him. No, not through your dream, not the boogey story you told your child. Those are the symptoms of a deeper connection. Think about your move away from the West, away from everything you knew – do you think that that was chance? And the sudden fame and notoriety of the bog monster story? There is nothing simply random in the world, John. Our lives are all telling a story, and only when we accept that can we begin to understand. – All right. Enough for today.” She went out the door.

I dutifully filled out the sheet, including filling in my address and (work) phone number, both of which gave me pause when I imagined Barbara crossing paths with Doreen. Then I traced my steps back

to the entryway. Barry was looking at a yoga book, with his head half cocked to the side, his free arm slightly raised, estimating from these few clues the pain he would endure trying the stance in the book. He looked up and shook his head disapprovingly, as if he read something prurient in my expression. I stopped at the guest book, wrote a brief “thanks” and tucked a check into the “contribution” box.

“Well?” as Barry led me out the door. “Is that not the closest thing you’ve ever experienced to a waking wet dream?”

I grimaced and pushed on.

“Sure, we don’t need to talk about it,” he said.

We got into his car, and he headed back to Chapel Hill. “Did she ask?” he said.

“Ask what?”

“If she could use you to contact the bog monster?”

“Why? What do you care? Are you afraid she’s going to scoop you?”

“On the contrary,” he said with a wide-eyed look that spooked me. “On the contrary.”

Click-Cluck began history lessons. Derek sat cross-legged across from her – the exoskeleton made this both easy and curiously relaxing – and she rested on her belly. After speaking a while, she would stretch her limbs and then unhinge them and curl her feet back onto her back. Then, just as abruptly, she would bring her forelegs down and raise the front part of her body so that her downward eyes could look at Derek. Since there was no distinguishable pupil, he couldn’t be sure where she was looking. Sometimes he thought she was observing his Adam’s apple, other times his face. He got used to her ticks and antennae rhythms, so much so that they became a source of calmness; he sometimes found himself breathing in their cadence.

Derek had a tough time with the lessons. He thought he was misunderstanding when Click-Cluck said that the current bug civilization was some 25,000 years old and that their historical era was over 100,000 years. She started with her society, promising that they would return to the highlights of earlier epochs. From its very beginning, this civilization was global; indeed, it had defined itself by defeating the regional states that had dominated bug history for some 25,000 years prior. This society was also grounded in Plato-like ideas of the preeminence of science and natural philosophy. Socially, there was a weak approximation of a democratic state: weak, because the governing class was elected, or rather selected, by itself, not the people. But there was a strong ethic of meritocracy, and slipsliding was undercut by an utter openness in all governmental proceedings. The governors sought their replacements among all progeny, judging them dispassionately for the appropriate analytic ability, coolheadedness and an utter dedication to the state. The triumvirate of their cultural self-understanding was rationality, evenhandedness and self-sacrifice.

‘But something is missing,’ Click-Cluck explained. ‘The state is passionless. It provides competently and enables a good life, but it has not allowed the bug race to rise above and create something new – not in many millennia. There have been many revolutions in social norms and interests, but they are like pieces of debris in a whirlwind, circling around each other without real change. Millennia ago, there was a desire to spread out into the great reaches of space: exploration and colonies followed. The reaction led to a dominating interest in perfecting life here on bug world – health, productive lifespan, and wellness. The colonies languished – some died, some returned home, some disappeared one knows not where in space. Others got by. Then another phase of exploration began, energized by the growing bestiary of life throughout the stellar neighborhood. That phase, too, came and went, while samples were being collected and brought back to our home world. In the years during which these centuries-old exploratory missions have been returning, the prevailing public opinion has changed four times: first philosophically opposed; then excited by the galactic biological richness; then disinterested; and now opposed in the majority, because the stability of our domestic order seems challenged through the very richness that had been celebrated for hundreds of years.’

“I don’t really understand these scales of time,” said Derek in English. Their conversations often occurred in both languages, since neither was very adept at the other’s. “Every ten years it seems like my society is re-inventing itself and running into entirely new problems.”

‘I’m speaking here,’ said Click-Cluck, ‘like a “hissistornn” (she threw in the English word historian because the bug concept is rather different). ‘If we used a temporal magnifying glass and looked at smaller periods, these generalizations would resolve into smaller and contradictory trends. But the same generalization holds for your civilization. You say everything changes every ten years. From another perspective, your world’s religious wars had been the norm for over 1000 years, probably since the rise of your modern civilization itself. Up to the day you left earth, your conflicts were defined by religious differences.’

“I don’t know. World War Two was a conflict among modern democracies, fascist states, and communist dictatorships.”

Click-Cluck threw in the English words required to render this in Bug: ‘Fascism and communism are easily understood in a religious context, as totalitarian states that attempt to recast religious allegiance for their own sake. Democracies are much more like our own natural-philosophic society, but on your planet they are so thoroughly dominated by their capitalist overlay that the rational core becomes distorted beyond recognition.’

“For us, democracy is still the most rational way to organize societies. A democracy can get the best out of our leaders by not trusting them too much. The people decide, for better or worse.”

‘Our theorists are in agreement,’ said Click-Cluck, ‘that rule by the “dezhdzhel” (people) is illusory. However, appearance seems so more important to earthlings than substance that we have to say there is no deception involved.’

Derek didn’t want to get into that argument, so he redirected the discussion: “If you are not in a democracy, can you disagree with your government?”

Click-Cluck: ‘Our government does not control ideas. Disagreements are expected, not just tolerated. What the government controls are the schools and libraries, the institutions of learning. Indoctrination is never far away. At times these places can get too far out of step with the society and cease to have the appropriate importance. But they always catch up with us eventually.’

“So what do you want to happen? Is it time for revolution?”

Click-Cluck clicked in a way that Derek had never heard before, a weird hollow sound, a bit like laughter.

‘We need to find a passion in our world, a reason for more than survival. Don’t misunderstand me. We survive very well. We learn, love, work, celebrate, all those things you know from your earth life, although they are also different on this world. While we survive well, many of us ask, is this enough? Is this why our planet created one global order, one set of guiding principles? Just to survive? Or is there more to be created?’

“Does this have anything to do with me?” Derek asked, but Click-Cluck didn’t answer. He let it pass, but watched her antennae whip as if in a gusting wind.

This discussion continued another day in another context. Derek was inquiring about the lifestyle of an average bug. Lifespan? Marriage? Children? 40-hour workweek? What? This led circuitously to the exemplary biography of one particular bug, whom we will call “Thunk.” This was Derek’s nemesis, the bug who had engineered his departure from his cell, and Derek recognized from a sparkle image that it was the same massive bug who had rolled the shock-ball at him. ‘He’s my supervisor,’ said Click-Cluck.

“Wait – your boss wants to see me dead?”

‘He doesn’t care whether you live, just whether you live among us.’

“Why doesn’t he make me stay in my cell?”

‘There are protocols.’

“Couldn’t he work around the protocols, maybe say I’m a thief or I’ve still got earth germs in me.”

‘That would not be very convincing. Our rules are not random things, Derek. If there are protocols for how exo-creatures are treated, then Thunk would be risking censure for breaking those protocols.’

“Didn’t he break the protocols when he engineered my escape?”

‘No. If there is no statement or reading of the protocols that forbids shoving a hover-bike into your cell, then by all means he is allowed. There may yet be a rebuke against taking this step while your main caregiver was away, but that is different, a practical matter.’

“How did he get to be your boss if he hates exo-creatures?”

‘There are many like him in our institute. He didn’t decide to come to the institute because he loves xeno-biology. You need to understand our social organization. Our society does not regulate relations through the circulation of money and individual ambition, as does yours. We define ourselves by the skills and efforts we bring to improve society. Above all, we are not private beings, “sedzenz” (citizens) in the sense that you know.’

Derek listened to a long disposition about their ethic of social contribution. In the place of money was a rather strict accounting of one’s ‘social ratio,’ the balance of one’s beneficial acts, as evaluated by one’s elders and betters, mechanically divided by the number of adult years lived. Coveted positions were assigned according to one’s specific skills and one’s ratio. This system prevented the accumulation of money and thereby the problem of hereditary wealth, though it tended to reward early achievers disproportionately, who were able to maneuver into the best positions for their age group and produce good acts at a higher rate, and the rest could never catch up.

‘Consider Thunk,’ said Click-Cluck. ‘He is my school contemporary, but because of his accomplishments he was pushed ahead one year in education, and was in a trainee position when I finished my studies. Two years later, I was a trainee and he had moved into a management position. Now he is directly over me, but his position is fundamentally different than mine. After this many years there is no direct career path from my position to his. Still, that he is only just above me is a sign of the ruling class’s displeasure in him, which I’m sure has to do with the fixation he has developed for exo-creatures. He would not be expected to remain in our institute with his social ratio. He entered the institute 50 years ago because it was the highest position he could attain given his social balance. He would similarly be expected to leave to keep raising the ratio.’

“Fifty years? How old is he?”

‘He is 170 years old.’

“Woohoo,” Derek said in an almost whistle. “You too?”

‘I am 168 years old. I started school younger than he because I knew I wanted to be female – those of us who do tend to mature earlier.’

Derek asked: “How old, – how long do bugs live?”

‘Our lifespan is about 250 years. Perhaps you are wondering, why not a shorter lifespan like yours, or why we have not achieved immortality, given our sciences and technologies. Many millennia ago, before the birth of our worldwide society, a small set of natural philosophers and scientists determined that the optimal crossing point for lifespan and new blood was 250 years. Not every society adhered to this principle, but those who did tended to thrive. In our own society, there is a ceremonial congress every 50 years, during which the lifespan question is considered, and the result is always the same. This number is more than just a target. Our medical sciences have perfected the care of our bodies through this age, and the physical body just wears out at the end, with remarkable consistency, give or take twenty years. Research into further longevity is not condoned, so that no one need be denied a life-saving treatment.’

“What about the societies that didn’t obey this principle? Wouldn’t they have had techniques to live longer? Wouldn’t there be a strong temptation for the ruling class to save itself, or at least some charismatic leader?”

‘These other societies were unreliable sources for knowledge of any kind, so we don’t look to them for guidance. As for secret projects to extend one’s own life, or the life of one’s hero, one could expect that on your planet, but it is simply impossible here. Among other things, our lives are not private. Do you believe, for example, that our discussion today is private?’

“I hope so,” Derek said. “For your sake as well as mine.”

‘There is no privacy, Derek. Your fixation on a private sphere may be a peculiarity of your species. Here, doors and walls are conveniences, not barriers. If someone wants to listen to every word you say, they can.’

“People are listening to us? Are we being recorded?”

‘I don’t know if anyone is listening, but I assume so. And yes, the recording is available, though with the passage of time recordings become more difficult to access.’

“Can we keep track of Think?”

‘Yes, I already do to a degree. But what you may be looking for – the ‘smoking gun’ of a conspiracy, yes? – simply does not exist. It is not a crime to plot against you. The crime would be to deny your manifest rationality, to accuse you of being a mindless salamander. Disagreement, competition, even repression can be accomplished rationally, from end to end. One may disagree with the outcome, but if the method adheres to the principles of our society then one must adjust.’

“If I get tricked into killing myself, you will just have to adjust?”

‘Of course. As would you, were I to die saving you.’

Despite the great strides he was making in understanding bugspeak, at least Click-Cluck’s, everything he learned still had an unreal shimmer. He didn’t bother his teacher with his itchy doubts, because he wasn’t sure how she would interpret it – a sign that his mind was unstable? Whether or not it was a dream world, he had no interest in spending his remaining time in a cell.

If he had to treat the world as real, he had a raft of questions.

“Was I the only one? If not, where are the others? And what about species from other planets? Can I see any?”

Click-Cluck answered: ‘You are the only human alive. The non-cognizant earth animal species were not deemed important enough to keep alive.’

“I thought you considered life sacred.”

“Szekredd” would not be the right word. We don’t kill. In this case, we did not work out the techniques, foodstuffs and exo-skeletons necessary for our planetary conditions, and the creatures simply died. We mitigated their pain. The plants were dried and preserved. The microscopic life was frozen.’

“Were there other humans? How many?”

‘Other than you there were five humans, of varying human constitution and ages, none quite as fit or suited as you. Many thin-skinned animals from weak-gravity planets do not survive the rigors of hibernation and travel at relativity speeds. You yourself barely recovered. There were difficulties as we purged your body of your symbiotic and parasitic organisms, and introduced our own. Many specimens are lost in this transition.’

“They’re all dead? ... Tell me the truth, did Think have them killed?”

‘They were dead before the mission returned. I believe at this point the appropriate thing to say is, “I’m sorry.” I don’t understand the logic of that, but I can sympathize that you must be saddened by being alone on another world, with a very alien species.’

“Can I see some of the other alien survivors? Are any like me?”

‘When the time is right, we will visit another survivor or two. You will need to be prepared and first need to know our world better.’

“Are any of them like me?”

‘Hairless apes, you mean? That is peculiarly earthen. These creatures come from very different circumstances and have their own evolutionary paths. We are none of us like the other.’

You may know the feeling, Brett, a two-edged sense of betrayal that comes from the consciousness of a secret that you must also embed in lies. It’s especially bad if you find yourself looking at and then through the eyes of those betrayed. As we crossed paths before dinner, your eyes challenged me to hide my nervousness even deeper. I averted my eyes from Doreen’s, and she seemed to accept that I would be angry about her co-opting Barry earlier in the day. You can have him, I thought. I hoped that, as the dinner wore on, my self-consciousness would disappear below the rising tide of family interests and tensions.

We chewed in silence a while before Doreen said, “I enjoyed meeting Barry today.”

I looked to see if her face was wearing anger or suspicion; she projected innocence. This was a concession, though her innocent expression dared me to respond with rancor.

“He’s an interesting guy,” I said.

With my last chance to answer angrily gone, she said: “Where did you two go?”

I had this line ready: “We like to go to Carolina Brewery.” Brett, I hope you understand that this misdirection was intended to save us all some aggravation. We’d have an opportunity to discuss my rendezvous later, and maybe at a distance laugh over it.

Doreen looked disappointed, as if she had imagined we had dropped in on an art opening.

You didn’t register this exchange at all, nor when we fell silent. Doreen and I glanced at each other. She wanted desperately to question you, but we both knew that a single interrogatory would douse any chance of a conversation. I imagined telling you about my encounter and waiting for your thoughts about this venial indiscretion. Your voice: “Get a life, dad. You worry about the craziest things.”

Maybe it was that night or maybe weeks later, I lay in bed thinking about what you were going through. That brought to mind the many remembrance movies churned out by the baby boomers. They have always seemed so wrong to me: portrayals of jocks and cheerleaders and nerds and outsiders in immutable groupings and with scripted self-awareness, all of which concentrates the view on the most lifeless accessories of adolescent existence. The anguish and joy of being young is the constant blending of what you know with a world that nearly every day presents itself anew.

Whaaa-tt, you would say to that, with good reason. How about this? I imagine you looking up at the ceiling like a prisoner on lockdown. Sometimes you feel such anger against me, against your mother, against our arguments and our steely silence. You want to say, ‘just get it over and don’t stay together because of me.’ But you really don’t want the house to split, and you know it isn’t your place to tell your parents how to live their marriage. What you want is to leave all these words behind, to break with everything that makes you angry – your parents, your satiric teachers, a few stupid peers who look at you like a freak, and a girl whom you think your friend but whose mouth gains a menacing curl whenever you become earnest. You wish you could scream just once, “I love you!” But how much would that destroy? And it wouldn’t be true anyway; you don’t know what love is, for however much your body buzzes like a tuning fork with the vibrations from her. She moves so casually through her life, indolent, straddling a knife-edge of cruelty and manipulation. You wish you *wanted* to be alone, free of awkward repetitions, no more waiting for when your real life begins. You lie on your bed, so full of mental and physical energy, and you’re motionless and paralyzed.

All right, Brett, let’s get on with it, then. Aside from some dramatization on my part, we haven’t had much of a story here. Not until after the 1999 Volvo sedan was found did we realize that causality could build an edifice of coincidence and trap us inside. The car was parked off the road at a trailhead leading into the Blackwood portion of Duke Forest. The keys were still in the ignition, the driver side door unlocked but closed. There were no signs of anything untoward, but the driver was gone. A missing

person report was filed, uncharacteristically quickly, and the papers and the local media informed. The driver was a tenth-grade girl from Chapel Hill.

The initial reports had no information other than a description of her and how to contact Chapel Hill police. Then, without further explanation, a “person of interest” was described as a young Latino and presented in a suspect sketch (teen-aged or early twenties, as non-distinctive in his Hispanic looks as the young missing blond girl in her Caucasian features). His car was possibly a 1987 teal Nova with California plates; the vehicle was presumed heading west, somewhere on Interstate 40 in North Carolina or Tennessee.

It emerged later – thank God – that the person of interest was her boyfriend of some months and that, when confronted by her parents, she had chosen to run away with this young man rather than forsake him forever. Her pretext for getting away from home was an afternoon with a girlfriend, and the couple’s meeting place was that out-of-the-way stretch of forest. The police knew all this fairly early on, though they did not inform the public. First, they were not sure that the relationship was completely consensual, given the parents’ accusations of brainwashing. Second, they found the boyfriend’s car hidden in a remote corner of adjoining but private woods, driven off the road in a deliberate effort to conceal its whereabouts. This left open the small possibility that their rendezvous had taken an ugly and unforeseen turn. The police kept all this information from us because they did not wish to tip off whoever had wanted to hide the car, but it meant that we were all left guessing.

Chapel Hill does not get news like this very often, and the parental milieu reacted as if lightning had struck simultaneously in front of every house in the town. I found myself reloading the local news Web pages, at first repeatedly, then in slowly lengthening intervals, for a number of days. Others volunteered, created or distributed posters, joined search parties, scoured the section of the forest where the girl’s vehicle had been found (the boy’s Nova was extracted and sequestered before anyone was the wiser). The family was represented by the father, who stoically and eloquently called for the opportunity to see their daughter and sister again. “Nothing else matters; we can work everything else out.” He spoke equally to his daughter and her “abductor,” but we just thought that was an attempt to create a relationship with this person or these persons unknown.

The story of the relationship came out after a week without substantive leads, and the police ultimately faced a lot of consternation over the secrecy. That’s when everyone’s attention fell with renewed emphasis on the forest tract. Stories came and went for days before the disappearance and the bog monster came up together, but they finally did. The occasion was an editorial where the local paper chastised the police for their secrecy while praising their diligence: “She and her boyfriend have disappeared in the woods as completely as the mythical bog monster, who is said to frequent those sections of the Duke Forest.” Once the connection was made, it did not take too many “telephone” connections before someone was writing in a weblog: “We cannot rest until the perpetrator is found and brought to justice, even if we must burn the bog monster out of his lair to do so.”

The next print headline: “Bog Monster Suspect in Disappearance.” Ironic speculation about the monster was actually six or seven paragraphs down from the lead, but the conceit was too powerful to let pass. The connection got repeatedly reinforced in the media until the previously subjunctive felt like the always real. This led to a cacophony of phone calls from the media to our house asking about this monster, all of which I refused. The reality hit home after I had a brief conversation outside our home with a pair of uniformed officers asking about what I knew about the disappearance.

Did you know then, Brett, that they asked for my whereabouts when the girl went missing? I obliged them with everything and did not bother to express outrage at the mere supposition. I said, sure, I understand; no stone left unturned. I was just happy I wasn’t off on one of my GIS hide-and-seeks at the time....

The boy’s mother – father nowhere to be found – did not speak much English and was shown stuttering to a reporter in a mean-spirited editing job that was replayed night after night. One got the

impression of shiftiness, but she was saying approximately this: “Don’t judge my son before you know the facts. The girl threw herself at him. They both want to get married. I’m sure when that’s done they’ll come home.” Of course, the time necessary for that came and went, and we still heard nothing.

Then, late one afternoon, Barry called and asked: “Have you heard from the police yet?”

“No,” I said, confused, unable to guess the context.

“Okay – okay. You can expect a call soon. We’ll catch up this evening.”

“What do the police want?” I asked.

“It’s not my place to say. Really, I don’t want to get in the middle of this. You’ll soon know from the proper authorities.”

I had a momentary adrenalin jolt, but remembered that you were in your room and that Doreen was in the office. We were all fine. I couldn’t get anything out of Barry before he hung up. I forgot about that strange call until the late evening, when I got another – from Barbara Hohenstauffen. “Have you heard,” she said, and when I said, no, in fact, I have no idea why you and Barry are being so mysterious – she thought better of the conversation and got off the phone in a hurry.

Doreen had told me that the phone was for me. She did not ask me who the voice was, but I figured that this would come up later.

The next morning, I was visited at work by two of Chapel Hill’s finest, two investigators. One was Jared’s father, Lieutenant Brightman. “Is there somewhere we could talk in private?”

I led them down the hall to the conference room, which happened to be empty. Brightman was a tall, muscular, heavysset man, with a short military haircut and a broad, pleasant face that took back some of the sharpness of his demeanor. His partner was a short, stocky man, looking twenty years or so his senior, a man who, judging by his irritated manner, had been asked too many times if he wasn’t already retired, with a wrinkled and tired face that was in all likelihood the result more of cigarette smoking than age or hardship.

Detective Horvath began the conversation: “We need your help in the missing person investigation of Hayley Blalock. I know that you’ve talked to officers already about the bog monster story, and that you’ve provided information about your whereabouts at the relevant times. You are not a suspect – not even remotely – but you have material information that we believe will help us.”

“I’m happy to help, as much as I can, but I don’t know what material information I could have.” – Meanwhile, I was already imagining that they had a fat dossier about my GSI/GPS habits and that they were going to ask me to consult as the most widely traveled denizen of the county, after they threatened me with a life sentence for a hundred trespasses.

“That’s great,” said Brightman. “Here’s the situation. We sometimes need to reassure relatives in missing person cases, and in high-profile cases that can mean working with the family’s private investigator, or being chummy with an interested reporter, or holding a weekly round-up of progress. In this case, we’ve been asked – we were asked – to include a *psychic* in the investigation.” He said the word with some disdain, or perhaps self-reproach for finding himself in this position.

I had a sinking feeling, as if being pulled into a circle of deceit and self-deception around the word “psychic.”

“Ferguson,” I said, moving to Brightman’s first name, “I don’t think you need to come to me about psychics.”

Horvath: “We’ve been asked to engage Barbara Hohenstauffen.”

That sinking feeling accelerated, then stopped with a punch to the gut. “Okay, look,” I said, “I did go to see her but it was really just a social experiment, a lark. I can’t speak about her psychic ability at all.”

“We’re not looking for a reference, John,” said Brightman. “She told us that she needs your help in this particular investigation – because of your involvement with the bog monster story.”

I had to laugh. “Ferguson, you of all people know how that story started and how little it means.”

Brightman looked at me with suddenly hard eyes, though there was only a minute change in his amiable expression. “She believes that you can provide important information about a ‘presence’ that she feels in the forest. That’s all we’ve gotten from her so far. We’re here to find out if you will work with us. It will mean a great deal to the family.” He stopped, but looked at me as if he were still speaking.

I wanted to say a hundred things, but only one made sense: “Of course, detectives. I will help as much as I can.”

Brett, you were roused from your stasis when, that evening, we had a family conference. I had to explain everything from the beginning, and you needed to be a part of it. Doreen understood how important this was to me and was in a wait-and-see mode. We sat at the dining room table, hands portentously on the table, as if we couldn’t control the mood that was building.

I didn’t bother going back too far: Barry and his interest in the bog monster (only briefly – nothing about his articles), his visit to our house, the appointment with Barbara. As the evidence of the rendezvous’s innocence, I produced the envelope with her written report, which, except for database extractions describing my horoscope and relating to my handwriting, was not much different than already described. Doreen took a good deal of time going through the report, even went so far as to smell the pages; the personal profile pages were on beige cotton paper and did have a faint eau de toilette odor. I took you, Brett, back to the fayre we attended and described my encounter there with Ms. Hohenstauffen; you didn’t seem to remember her. Doreen’s eyelids flared at our discussion of this, but mostly, I’m sure, for the omissions of which I was guilty. I apologized for lying to her about the appointment. “I thought it simpler; it didn’t matter either way, and...” I didn’t finish, and she glared without any sign of wanting to answer.

I described my role with the police and Barbara. You asked me why the police wanted me, but I saw in Doreen’s eyes: what does this woman want with you? “I don’t know what started this, but Barbara seems to think that the bog monster is real and that I have some connection to it.... My fear is that the police believe that her connecting me to the bog monster is the same as connecting me to the disappearance. You should remember that I was at work and came home on time that day. I’ve got enough witnesses at work, and Doreen, you know when I got home because it was right before dinner –”

“Oh my God, John,” said Doreen too loudly, as if an awful vista had just opened up before her. “You’re a suspect?”

“No,” I replied, “they told me I’m not a suspect. It’s just that they can’t understand Barbara’s explanations.”

“I’m not sure I would understand them either. – Are you telling me that the Blalocks asked for this woman?”

“I guess so. I really don’t know. For all I know, Barbara called them up and convinced them.”

Doreen thought for a moment. “If she did that, and talked about her belief in your connection to the bog monster, maybe they grew suspicious and informed the police.”

I nodded.

“So what do we do?” she said, suddenly matter of fact.

“I’ve got nothing to hide, Doreen, so I think it’s a little early for a lawyer. In the meantime, we will all have a chance to see how serious anyone is about all this.”

Doreen’s lids arched again.

“We’ve been invited to a séance to communicate with the bog monster.”

I woke up two mornings later at the magical hour of 3 a.m. It is a time, in my experience, like no other. Four a.m. is already close to dawn and more hopeful. Two a.m. I’ve experienced too many times from the evening side of things to say anything negative about it. But at three a.m. you are always alone.

The dawn should be on the other side of another brief sleep, but sleep comes hard at this time. Noises are louder and stranger. Thoughts have no barriers, little relationship to daytime concerns, and few rational limits. If you wake up at 3, you are just half a step from dream walking, and like a dream walker you are helpless before the ideas that overtake you.

I woke up knowing my mistake. The bog monster did exist. And if it didn't – then whatever the monster stood for, *that* existed. All my denials were just rational fatuousness. What is my connection to *that*? It could be a psychic link, or maybe a pathological sympathy for any sink of evil. Or it could be more tragic: my geographical mapping skills somehow meant that I alone had the ability to recognize the existence of an evil – yet I denied myself the opportunity through my rationality.

I don't know if you've experienced a real cold sweat, Brett. My forehead exuded cold, and my back was covered with a clammy dew. I padded downstairs, mostly unaware of the plan that had already formed in my mind. I went into the kitchen, looked into the fridge. The food all glowed strangely in the overly bright glare. I went to the office, and that's when I realized what I had come to see: I turned on the computer and began searching the Internet for a history of young women gone missing in the Chapel Hill area.

Each word was difficult to punch out at that hour: Orange County, NC. Woman. Missing. Missing Person. Jane Doe. Murder. Forest. Duke. I tried these and a dozen more. I found either way too many or just a few hits, depending on the query, but nothing pertinent. If there was a pattern, this was not the way to find it.

After thirty minutes, not far from abandoning the task, I happened upon an excerpted *Hillsborough Herald* from 1820. Expecting nothing but mill prices and the odd lard sale, I opened the web page. "Notice," the first article began, "the attention of the public is requested. On the evening of March 20, 1820, Dally Moore, a free mulatto girl of seventeen, was taken from subscriber's home. I have known her mother since Dally was an infant, and the fact of her freedom can be proved beyond any doubt. She is round five feet tall, with a yellowish complexion and bushy black hair, and with rings in her ears. Earnest Bryan is suspected of having a forged bill of sale and is believed to be taking her south to sell her as his property. Your assistance is needed to save this girl from an undeserved fate."

This wasn't even close to what I was looking for, except as collateral evidence of human depravity, but I couldn't help but be drawn in, first by the surname, wondering if there might some connection to Barry, then by the story. Did the parties know each other? Who was Earnest Bryan? Was he related to her, or in unrequited love with her? Or some other sort of oppressor and rogue? Who was Dally? If not the Bryans, then who introduced the white into her genetic line? Subscriber? Was her mother freed, or was she? Was she an energetic young woman, with a bright future obvious to all around her, or a quiet, introspective girl whose defeatism meant no resistance? She slowly took form in my mind, a young woman on the cusp of an exotic beauty: an uneasy balance of European and African attributes, long-limbed and high-hipped, with exaggerated cheeks, big but deep-set eyes beneath bushy eyebrows, and coffee-brown irises glowing against her yellowing mocha skin. Once they formed, the eyes stared now at me with disdain and defiance.

She was lost again that early morning, defenseless on her way to a lifetime of slavery. I was as little able to help her as "subscriber." Google knew nothing else about her, and I felt in the pit of my stomach that I would never be able to find her. I had to let her go, but couldn't. My eyes welled up and over, and I cried two – five – ten minutes for her, a deep full lamentation, with sobbing and convulsive breathing. I was crying for Dally, for me, for my family, for Hayley, even for Derek. When the tears and heaving stopped, the cathartic effect was complete. I shut down the computer, sighed and wandered upstairs. I lay down in the bed beside Doreen, breathing softly. I said a short prayer to the darkness, wishing that all wandering souls find the rest they deserve.

We left Derek in his new home, now part of bug society and educated somewhat in the political stakes – if not exactly the personal risks – of his bug world existence. He tried to normalize life. He communicated with Clug-Cluk-Tock as much as he could; the bug did not understand mammalian speech and often could not decode his attempts at bug speech. What they did do together was travel. Derek would work out a target and goal with Click-Cluck, and she would arrange the trip with her colleague, and the latter would guide Derek on the trip. Derek's glasses were now his constant companion – his eyes were usually able to tolerate them for lengthy periods of time – and he was conversant with all their features. He did not feel lost in the dark that pervaded most spaces. It helped that Click-Cluck had installed a full-spectrum light for his sleeping chamber, a way of acquiring vitamin D and keeping some visual acuity. He read books – mostly e-books that had been scanned by the explorers that had snatched him – and watched both bug and earth TV on a projected screen, and often exercised his arms, legs and neck by removing the exoskeleton.

Travel was what interested him most. The bug world was unbelievably large. Despite the substantial speeds of their underground tunnels and with much overnighting on the road, it seems that Derek never saw more than a small corner of their world. Well, this place is fine, his guides would say, but if you really want to see something special we'd have to fly for a couple days to such and such place. There was commercial flying on their planet, but it was hindered by the density and thickness of the atmosphere, such that planes had to travel even slower than on earth. Derek suspected this was another of their artificial limits, but when asked Click-Cluck just did the bug equivalent of a shrug – stretching the mouth hooks like a yawn. Click-Cluck never entertained the idea of putting him on a plane; Derek sensed that she was afraid of putting him in a situation with catastrophic potential, the temptation it would provide.

The sites he enjoyed were temples dedicated to bug rationality, museums documenting and illustrating early communal life, industrial farms – fed by jets of sulfurous methane – of the bacteria-like life-forms that were harvested and processed into food. There were gigantic natural caverns, glowing lava lakes and rivers, and cool-running lakes and rivers of water. At one remarkable simulation hall, Derek was introduced to the surface of the planet: hot, barren, dust-riven and inhospitable, even to the bug creatures that had evolved here. At some point in the distant past, apparently because of an astrophysically abrupt change in its orbital path, their planet had morphed from a green to a brown planet, and almost all life had died out. Those forms of higher life that survived did so by evolving into burrowing or shelled niches. The surface, for all of bugdom's long prehistoric and historical duration, had been like a body of water for humans: a place to explore but quickly deadly, a source of sustenance and a way to travel great distances, but unpredictable and unforgiving of the ill-prepared. Derek asked Click-Cluck when he next spoke with her if they could visit the surface. She promised they would, when he was better able to care for himself. She said: 'You cannot rely on any one else, on the surface. You must be prepared to save yourself.'

'I've heard that before,' he said, but when she didn't reply: "Aren't I risking my life every day that I don't just lie in my room?"

'This is very different,' she said. 'We'll both know when you're ready to do this.'

"I really need to see some sunlight," he snapped back.

There was a long silence at that point between the surface dweller and the underground denizen. He felt some vindication at the formulation, but Click-Cluck's antennae were unaffected by stress or confusion, and he had to assume she saw no force in his statement.

The other open question – when could he see other aliens? – brought out the anxiety that the surface did not, though he did not know why. Once when he was browsing on a projected screen, he saw what looked like an alien life form. After a few moments the channel went blank. He hadn't understood the narration at all, but the creature seemed to be immobilized in a bed of some kind. That made him uneasy. Click-Cluck ignored his questions, as if he were simply not making sense.

He appreciated all they did for him, but he also felt trapped. He knew they protected him by observing him day and night, but they also circumscribed what he could do. The surface and visiting other aliens were the two main opportunities denied, but they also interceded whenever he tried to strike up a conversation with other bugs. They no doubt wanted to protect both him and his intended conversationalists, but Derek gradually grew bitter about it. He tried to strike up conversations where he could – in the freeway tunnels, at tourist sites, in stores. Once Click-Cluck had explained how bugs greeted each other – ‘your peaceful passage of the day’ was the standard greeting – and Derek did his best to pronounce that. Of course, for all he knew, he might have been enunciating ‘your daily dose of bug squishing,’ but even at such a level of misunderstanding the mere fact of a primate floating among them, trying to speak with them, must count for more than all the linguistic mistakes in the world. Surely aliens were not so numerous that they could become more jaded than fascinated? Click-Cluck tried several times to explain that bugs don’t introduce themselves without a reason, that such an act was difficult for her species to understand. Even so, Derek thought. What about that damn ball? Wasn’t I expected to turn away from it? Wouldn’t that have given Thunk an opportunity to ignore my intelligence, my rights? Why is it that these bugs can hide behind the same ill ease and fear that I had to abandon?

Two thoughts came to mind, and then a conclusion. First, he knew that he made them uncomfortable. Ungainly and gangly limbed, with oily skin that looked to them like stomach lining; mucus-oozing orifices; beady pupils with eerie white eyes; a huge skull; and a chomping mouth with a half circle of cutting and crushing teeth: he was all out of proportion for that planet, and disturbingly appointed like a predator. Sure, he was weak, unaggressive and dependent. But his body type otherwise fit the requirements of a hunter of bug creatures. He also understood that resentment against aliens was widespread. His mammalian in-your-face-ness played right into this point of view and agenda, but Derek can’t really be blamed. He couldn’t repress the exuberance of his joys and his fears, now that he had to live them out in this world.

We had just a few days before the séance. For my part, I had to withstand the urge to foot it out into the Duke Forest and soak up the mystery, maybe do some divining-rod work with my mind. There could be nothing worse right now. The prohibition on wandering was doubly hard, because I had a bead on the farmstead of the “subscriber” in Dally’s story, whose name was in the story byline. No one with that person’s family name lived in the area, but a local road bore the name, and through that I was able to uncover the family’s likely plot of land in county records. I did not hope to trace their history and holdings back to the time of Dally, but I longed to see the land. Maybe I would say a prayer, I couldn’t predict.

You know, Brett, that I have a strained relationship with religion. As I age I’ll probably succumb to the prudence of religious observation – covering the bases – but I don’t feel the connection now. Oh sure, I’ve called on a higher being when confronted with an imminent deadline, a forgotten pot on a burning stove, a near-miss on the freeway. Panic has convinced me more than once that maybe there *is* a line inside my head to the divinity, and maybe now’s the time to open it.

When I was your age, I fell into religion, in the way I fell into many things. I wouldn’t call it peer pressure, because I had a certain pride in not being a follower and I even felt this was rebellion. It was religion in the sheep’s skin of paganism – loose gatherings of dozens of kids, parties really, with a religious tone and religious songs and clean skirts and a general sense of fun and acceptance. I’m sure you understand that fun did not always mean acceptance. All too often fun was a dangerous thing that could be turned against you like a tossed dagger, mesmerizing for the rest, searing for you. This place was different, and we all felt it. What we didn’t know is why, because none of us were mentally prepared to ask the question: can’t we just be this gentle and unassuming without a preacher or a uniform?

So, yes, I accepted Jesus as my personal savior, and I began a personal relationship with him. I gave everything over to God and felt better. I can't say for sure whether some part of me knew from the beginning, but as I stretch back I can feel how unreal it was. I said it and believed it, but without constant reinforcement it was doomed. We all reinvent ourselves over the years; even if we have dedicated ourselves to something, with each transplantation into a new situation it becomes blander, more threadbare, until finally it is no more than a lamentable imitation of itself. Thus my now ragtag relationship to God. Or, more accurately, I have no relationship, but sometimes I still apologize to him for leaving him behind, knowing full well that I have no business feeling sorry for the omniscient creator and no need to apologize to a creatorless void.

As much as I have turned away from heaven, Brett, sometimes I've been afraid that you have turned away from life. At some point in my young life, I realized that I could not stand aside and critique the world, that I needed to embrace it. I have wondered when you will reach that moment. On this morning, for instance, you were moping over a bowl of cereal, staring blankly down. At intervals, I read the paper, spooned cereal, and glanced your way. You looked as if you were stuck on a fulcrum of time, able neither to reach backwards nor to move forward, a balance of inaction and observation. I can't know if you were feeling depressed, or just introspective. Had an adolescent wash of chemicals put your dreams, or maybe a new perspective on life, just beyond the grasp of your conscious mind? Were you roiling inside, fighting circular currents among your neurons that were just about to make you scream to the sky?

While I contemplated that, Doreen came into the kitchen, and gave you a swift and happy kiss on your temple, an expression that you half batted away, half cherished. Some things change more slowly than others.

Derek woke up early, didn't understand. Someone was speaking to him, a human voice. He thought maybe he was dreaming, but he had to concentrate to put the words together. They didn't enter through his ears; the thoughts seemed to emerge from his language center fully formed, unvocalized, with not even a whisper behind them. Nothing he heard made sense, as if he had stumbled into the middle of a conversation, or rather, a lengthy soliloquy. He spoke: "Who are you?" There was no answer in the auditory stream, but Derek began to understand. It was someone telling his own story, relating some things about his childhood. "Who are you?" Derek asked more loudly. The words flowed on for a few minutes longer, then stopped.

In the silence: "Did you speak to me?"

Derek was startled. – "Yes, I did."

"Aha. Well, that is surprising. I did not expect to understand the replies so quickly."

"Why not?"

"Well, let's see. Because of where you are. I did not expect this."

"If you didn't expect an answer, why are you speaking?"

"Oh, I did expect an answer, but I did not expect to understand it."

Derek said with some emphasis: "Where are you?"

"That is a complicated matter."

"Are you in my mind?"

"So to speak."

Derek let out a long sigh, so much so that the next words were barely breathed: "Am I crazy?"

The voice said: "I don't have any evidence of that."

"But you are a voice in my head. I must be psychotic."

"I may be a voice in your mind. But I'm not a psychotic manifestation."

Derek was silent for minutes. Finally he wondered if he was alone again. "Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here. I have no where to go."

Well, that's it, thought Derek. Insanity. His mind was slowly splitting up and would begin to dissolve. The other possibility – considered again and again, then rejected, whether because he feared it or desired it – was that this voice was sanity, and he was beginning to break through the illusion of bugdom. But if he was becoming sane in a comatose body, aware finally of the absolute fact that he was stuck inside his own mind, never to leave, then he would much rather be insane.

"If my mind is speaking to me, then I must be crazy."

"I suppose, although there is a very funny joke that I will tell you later, if we're still speaking."

"Seriously, I'm going nuts."

"That may be, my friend, but I'm not your hallucination."

"No? Then how is it that I'm speaking to you – in my head – on a planet thousands of light years from earth, when I was the only human to survive the trip?"

A sudden spark: maybe he wasn't the only survivor. A telepathic link?

"Well, actually, that's why I'm surprised we're speaking. I hadn't anticipated finding an earthling so far from home. At least at this time."

"And where are you? In a spaceship orbiting the planet? In a transporter beam somewhere?"

"Where I am is immaterial. What I am is human, mostly. And what I am doing is speaking to you through a technology that allows me to project my thoughts across time and space into the electrical patterns of complex objects like higher-order brains."

"Across time and space?" Right, he thought.

"Yes, to anywhere I want within the life of the universe. It's quite a stunning technology, I'm constantly amazed."

"And you pick this technology up at the local drug store, or what?"

"No, it's something I've had developed for me. It's taken – quite a while."

Derek wanted to stop the conversation again, then decided to ask one more question. "What would have happened if you started talking to a bug?"

"Higher-order brains only."

"The intelligent creatures on this planet I call bugs, but I suppose they look more like giant land crabs. They don't think like us, their language doesn't really have verbs, and they click their mouths to make the sounds."

"The technology is designed to work with unlike minds. It sets up a feedback loop, where the mind does most of the work, especially in assigning the words and phrases to the implanted meaning. But it's entropic. Sometimes we talk past each other for a while before I move on. I have to expect that the individual will understand more of me than I do of them. An artifact of having all the technology here on my side of things."

"Where is your side? Are you on earth now?"

"No, I haven't been to earth in eons. Where I am is immaterial, both figuratively and literally. I have a story that I can tell you, if you wish."

"What do you want from *me*?"

"To listen, to understand, to ask your questions. I am very old, and this is how I wish to spend my last days and years – talking to live beings. I have no one here now. I like to talk to beings from the past."

"Can't talking to the past screw up time, change the universe somehow?"

"Interesting question, but irrelevant. The universe is always changing, we just don't know it. Why should time travel be any different?"

"But what if something you tell a person causes a war to happen, or earth to be destroyed, or an evil dictator not to die, what have you, and the you I'm speaking with is never born?"

"I should be so lucky," he said.

Just then, Clug-Cluk-Tock popped up at the doorway, wondering with whom Derek was arguing. Both Derek and his interlocutor were silent for a considerable time, long after Clug-Cluk-Tock had disappeared.

We got into the car, as if for an everyday outing, with no one saying a word about where we were going. Brett, you looked out the window, bored and stoic, while Doreen busied herself with stowing the casserole and settling the cookies she had baked. It was a potluck séance, of all things, a potluck séance deposition. Laughable, if it weren't also tinged with the possible loss of my freedom, a no longer unbelievable link in the chain of circumstance that I have laid out here. It felt like anything was possible at the end of that drive.

Doreen looked at me once we got to Pittsboro, trying to gauge the fact that I didn't need directions to find the house. I kept my eyes on the road, but she knew that I noticed. Just one of the loops you can pass through in an instant... Once parked, I went around the car and helped her with the casserole, not eager to lead to the door. She did not oblige me, and stared at me until I started up the walk.

We heard voices around the back, but I rang the doorbell. It was a warm evening, with the rich smell of warmed vegetation. It took a minute, then someone wandered around from behind the house. It was Jared's mother. Your face lit up, Brett, and you went right past her to find Jared. All this family combined with the investigation – it was disturbing. What if I had been guilty and desperately pulled a gun when the inspector pointed his pipe stem at me and said, "It was you, was it not, Mr. Geographic Information System? Why did you do them in?" Illogical as it was, I was irritated that they would put my family at risk. Of course, this being Chatham County, it was naïve to assume interrogations or arrests. They were more interested in the subtle interactions, the dropped clues, the awkward silences. If I began to be concerned, they would no doubt relent, change the topic, and make me feel at ease, as if I were as innocent as the newest born baby, crying unawares in a hospital bassoon.

We walked around the side of the house and became part of the party. Ferguson Brightman was there, as was detective Horvath and his wife. Barbara was not to be seen, but her two small girls were putting together some construction paper decorations for the patio tables. There was a couple that I recognized from the television and perhaps elsewhere around Chapel Hill, standing awkwardly near the little girls, Mr. and Mrs. Blalock. They had that look: that they had said yes to the wrong people and were just trying to hang on until it wasn't insulting to leave. Behind and to the side was the grill chef – I recognized him as Jerry Brook.

He was tall and thin, with the hunched back and rolled shoulders that you sometimes find on tall people who see no benefit in it. Most tall people, I find, get an unspoken pleasure from that moment where they stand next to you and you have to look up in acknowledgement of their physical advantage. But some seem impervious to this relationship and slump to fit in with the mass of people around them. This is not to say that Jerry came across as a slacker. When you saw his face and especially his eyes you saw his intensity. These were slightly protruding eyes, but they had an undeniable energy. It's more difficult to say why – no softening from laugh lines, no slitting from squinting or looking askance, infrequent blinks, an expressionless tense face – whatever it was, they were intriguing. He seemed not to notice me looking at him, but as time went on I sensed that he was using his occasional glances around to size me up.

As Doreen and I spoke with the Brightmans, Barbara emerged from the house with a big bowl of green salad. I watched for an expression from Doreen, but she was engaged and genuinely seemed surprised when Abby Brightman introduced her to "our medium."

"I have such a respect for those with psychic abilities," said Doreen. "It's quite a gift." I expected irony but heard none.

Barbara smiled at her, then shook her head compassionately. “I don’t feel I have a gift. I’ve been fortunate to develop what any of us has.” After having said that, she smiled more broadly and gave the slightest nod in encouragement to Doreen. Then she looked over her side for just a moment at Jerry.

Without transition, Doreen asked: “How long have you been married?”

I was half cringing, thinking that Barbara would take offense at this question, which brought together her obvious apprenticeship to Jerry with her marriage to him. But that shows how much I know. She managed to flaunt her hand with its sizeable engagement and wedding rings while she answered: “We’ve been married six years.”

For her part Doreen nodded to invite her to go on. I eased myself away and made for Jerry. It was time to get to know him. He watched me approach with his blank expression and piercing eyes – it was as if he was daring me to get close. “Hi,” I said. “I’m John Densch.” I wanted to put out a hand but his stance was such that you could almost see in front of him a line whose crossing came at your own risk.

“Welcome, John Densch.” Without adjusting his eyes, he smiled briefly, and then his face went blank again.

“We appreciate the invitation,” I said, unable to come up with anything else.

It was as if that banal phrase came across with a putrid smell. He looked away immediately and opened the grill; the burgers and dogs spattered, and smoke billowed and yellow flames shot up among them. After jabbing at them for a while – I would have turned them if only to spread out the carbonization – he closed the grill and looked around. His expression said: You’re still here?

I smiled weakly, and he loosed a small but burdened sigh. “Barbara!” he shouted without looking at her. She slid over and put a hand on my shoulder. “Come meet the Blalocks.”

She took her hand away, and I followed her to the nervous-looking couple. “Dana, Gary, this is John Densch.” I put my hand out and they very tentatively took it, with a side-glance toward our constabulary fellow guests.

“Pleased to meet you,” Dana said, but I heard: I don’t know the world any more.

I was wondering as well. If they believed that I could have any role in their daughter’s disappearance, then it took quite a bit of self-control to interact with me at all. I understood their exasperated tone – none of us can control ourselves quite when we are playing our own selves in a mood we do not feel. The police detectives were free to play cat to our mouse, but the Blalocks were here as themselves: how much could be asked of their dignity?

Or maybe – and this was just dawning on me – there was more to this story than I had reason to suspect. Maybe they knew more than we were getting from the press, even after the boyfriend revelation. But if they knew where Hayley was, what was this game about? For however much I had been impressed by Barbara’s sympathetic insights, I couldn’t imagine that her abilities were at the heart of this.

It was days later that we all learned that Hayley had contacted her parents early on, but they so alienated her with their demands that she did not call again. They were convinced that she was just on the lam, but the police, still unsure of what had transpired, persuaded them to hold off any public announcements. Even the ATM surveillance photos of a hooded and sunglassesed girl downloading cash advances from her credit card did not resolve the matter. The Blalocks resisted police requests that they cut off the credit, because they – the parents – got comfort from the reports of Hayley’s movements, and, more importantly, were afraid of what she would do if forced to choose between coming home or moving deeper into a drifter lifestyle.

We also learned later that this séance drama was the brainchild of the detectives. They were intrigued by my connection with Barbara, as laid out by my good friend Barry, and were playing a hunch. I have no doubt they were desperate to find some pay-off for their deception of the public. When Barbara and Barry offered to help solve this and other “crimes,” the detectives speculated that she had somehow been tipped off about other crimes – perhaps as my lover? – and for her part was trying to

profit from this proximity. The theory was far-fetched, but there was one salient fact that they kept coming back to: my now obvious similarity to a phantom figure who had been trespassing throughout the county. Subtle or not, my wanderings generated a number of reports of trespass and suspicious activity in their wake. I couldn't really blame Ferguson that he thought whoever did that could be an unstable character, maybe capable of anything. – Aren't we all capable of more than we want to admit? It's a paradox that as soon as we say we're incapable of something we are tempted by some mental necessity to imagine ourselves doing it, as if the assertion creates a vacuum that the mind must fill. Of course, for most of us, the void fills back in with other thoughts and that is the end. For others, or so I imagine, the first involuntary thoughts lead to an inadvertent act, and then to another until, finally, their minds feed directly out of their poisoned imaginations.

Some time later we were sitting later at the tables, eating the tasty but too crunchy burgers and hot dogs that Jerry had put out. He did not sit, didn't seem willed to eat at all. Doreen was across from Barbara, with whom she had struck up a surprising rapport – I suspected that her curiosity and Barbara's self-assured innocence led them down this path. I think they also recognized in each other someone who cared unusually deeply about how human soul expresses itself, if from different perspectives. At that moment, they were talking about alternative health regimens. All of a sudden, Jerry was standing behind and leaning over Barbara: he wrapped his two forearms around her neck and used this embrace to move her from one side to the other. He was smiling at us in an imitation of human warmth, but you could see the alarm in her eyes from her respiratory pathway being constricted. I did not need to look at Doreen to know her expression. For my part, I could feel the protective and male rage rise up at this challenge not only to civil society but also to my relationship, such as it was, with his woman. No you don't, I thought, ready to leap across the table.

"It's so nice to have visitors, isn't it, my love," he said.

She reached up with one hand and pulled on the tighter arm. "Jerry," she said, with unexpected hoarseness, "please."

He feigned surprise and looked down at her. "Oh, sorry, dear." He let go of her, straightened up and then very deliberately rested his hands on her shoulders.

She smiled a half smile, cleared her throat, and said: "This is a very special evening." She took a deep breath and managed more of a smile. "I've been looking forward to sitting down with you and communing with you all about what the forests hold." She looked directly at the Blalocks. "I sense that there is good news for you, although I don't know if you will receive it this evening."

No one wanted to speak up at this moment, so she invited us to go inside and prepare for the séance. She would need just a few minutes to put her children to bed. We all got up and, done with our meal or not, wandered inside. Our parlor would be the room in which Barbara worked on my aura. As I collected condiment bottles to carry them inside, Jerry poked my shoulder from behind and stopped me.

"John Densch," he said, "do you have any idea why you're here today?"

I cleared my throat. "I suppose we're going to find out."

"Not hardly," he said flatly. "The show inside is just the sugar coating. The real work is going on here." He pointed to his temple. "This mind is trying to save your sorry ass."

I felt I had to keep up my side. "I didn't know it needed saving."

He was staring at my left eye, did not switch as people normally do. "I don't mean from the keystone cops in there, and I don't mean your immortal soul. I mean save you from your projection."

"What projection?" I said.

"You can't see it at all, can you?" he said with a certain satisfaction. "You don't even know how little you know."

He paused and stared for a few seconds. "Higher dimensions cannot be measured, except by the mind, hence their invisibility to a boxed-in thinker like you. Religious masters have since the dawn of mankind recognized it, and have sought to capture its essence in their catechisms, but without a rigorous

understanding they could only misinterpret and distort the insights they gained. There are new masters, John Densch. We have adapted the most demanding meditation techniques from the world's religions, and are using them, without the comfort of a false metaphysics, to unlock the secrets of the universe's many dimensions.

"You of course have no idea what role you are playing in this drama. Barbara documented your cluelessness in her profile, though she misunderstood the cause. Your psychic energy has been diverting for years. For all you can't understand, I bet you can see that much. John, can you explain what carries you out into the forest? Can you explain why your relationship with the charming Doreen loses passion and comfort daily? No? You have no idea why you feel so depleted, so self-absorbed and yet so empty, do you?"

"It's really very simple, so simple I can describe it to you in one sentence. Your mind is projecting. In fact, your little projection has planted itself in the collective consciousness, and maybe even out in the forest itself. But the psychic origins of this manifestation are *undeniable*." He stopped searching for something in my eye and just stared blankly.

"I don't know what to say, Jerry." And I didn't. I turned and headed toward the back door.

"Hey Densch," he bellowed once I was at shouting distance. "Don't flatter yourself that you're special. Gaia is working through you. You're just a channel. – Maybe this will help you understand: A creek will always find the path of least resistance. Always!" I didn't answer before entering his house.

Barbara arrived after we had all taken seats in something of a circle. We sat on straining plastic folding chairs, but the many candles, the room's red theme and the flickering shadows around us gave the circle a feeling of deep substance and seriousness. Barbara had changed her clothes and appeared in something close to a gypsy soothsayer outfit. She wasn't embarrassed by the cliché; you got the impression that this helped her feel her place. Jerry did not join us. Barbara seemed to avoid my eyes as she looked around the circle to try to get everyone's attention.

"All right," she said. "We are here today to try to understand more about what the forests are telling us. All of you are going to help; the success of this séance depends on every one of us. Every last one of us." At that moment, her eyes rested expressly on you and Jared. I think I saw Jared wink, but she didn't acknowledge it. Barbara described some exercises that we would do to loosen up, or as she put it, "tune our psychic circuits." Paired up, we tried to imagine what each other was thinking; there was no check-back to see how far off we were, even though we were counseled how to foreground our own thoughts for easier pick-up by the other. "Don't worry," she said, "this exercise isn't about success or psychic ability." "What is it about?" asked Horvath. "It's about," said Barbara with a knowing smile, "embracing the possible."

Horvath looked unconvinced, so the next stage was a surprise. "Close your eyes," said Barbara after we circled up again. She was silent for an awkwardly long time, then went on: "Now imagine the piece of the Duke Forest that you know best. It may be a stretch along the side of a road, with a sign about when the stand was last harvested or what happened to it during Hurricane Floyd. Or it may be a trail you run on. A trailhead you've seen and wondered about. Perhaps you have just imagined what it must be like, a quarter mile in and no one around. Picture this place." She let us feel the time passing again. I imagined the last time and place I had reached ground zero in the forest. "Without opening your eyes, please tell me some things that you see." Now it was our turn to be silent, until Detective Horvath spoke up: "I am walking with Nora beside a small lake. The dirt is beige clay and covered in pine needles, still wet from the last rain."

Barbara did not speak. We named tall tree stands; a sign describing storm-borne decimation, with a few shattered trees behind it; shaded darkness; gravel roads and the distinctive green posts with thick cable strung between. No-dog signs (why that, one wonders). A dusting of snow. Leaves swirling in the

wind. Oaks, beeches and various species of pine. A lone turkey vulture circling overhead. A sparrow hawk on the prowl. The distant echo from the freeway. This went on for five or ten minutes.

“That was wonderful,” said Barbara. “Please open your eyes.” We all blinked and squinted despite the low light; the candles burned little holes in the fabric of our vision. “Look at me. Just look at me. Good. Now, when I look at you, tell me what I want to know.” We had no idea how this was going to work, but I found myself eager to do just that. What was inside me that she wanted to know?

She looked first at Jared. “Do you see signs of this creature they call the bog monster?” He looked suspicious. “You mean, in the forest?” She smiled and nodded encouragingly. “Just where you were.” He looked up to the right, as people remembering are wont to do, and she reminded him: “Look at me.” He looked back and did his best to stare. “No, I can’t see anything. Except you.” There was no chuckle, but we felt a moment of relief. I was worried how she would handle him. “Let me put you back, then. Are there trees in your corner of Duke Forest?” “Lots,” he said. “Describe them, please.” He did a very nice job of giving a panoramic summary of new-growth and mature stands, with a road trailing off into the distance. “Look down.” He smiled this time. “No,” she confirmed, “not here. There.” He kept his eyes on her. “I see gravel.” “Now,” she said, “walk toward the tall trees. Keep looking down. What do you see?” “A ditch dug for run-off, a little grass, leaves, lots of pine needles.” “If you were going to see a sign of this creature, what would it be?” “I guess a foot print.” “Good. What would it look like?” “Big – I guess Bigfoot big. Five toes like us. A big gait.”

That was enough from Jared. With each of us, she looked at us and got more of what we would see if the bog monster were real: dung, a tuft of fur, a big silhouette, movement in the forest, perhaps a bellowing voice, oversized hands but gentle enough to pick up a tiny baby. Then you, Brett, and I were all that were left. “What do you see?” Barbara asked you. “I see,” you began with a defiant voice that had me concerned. I saw the train wreck coming: she was every girl who had scorned you, or wanted something from you. “I see some fronds that I push out of the way, and there’s the monster’s lair.” You stopped to see if she would protest. “There’s a big mattress the guy nabbed from the dump, and a TV that he has to have next to the bed, even though there’s no electricity to run it, and same for a small party fridge, and a kitchen table with last month’s paper, next to an empty tea cup. There’s more, if you’d like it.” Barbara looked over to me without answering. I couldn’t see a plea in her eyes, but we made contact: We both knew that this day she was exposed, in much the same way I had been exposed at the aura reading. This was my chance to crush all this ambiguity and get it out of my life, forever.

I didn’t move for a while, until my response took shape. “I see eyes.” My breathing forced a pause. “They are looking at us. At me. They are not human eyes, but they are intelligent. I guess something like chimpanzee or gorilla eyes. In a yellow brown hue that is not human. Not much white, or maybe it’s reddened. They are not dilated predator eyes, but they stare the same way, asking something of us. Of me. I don’t know what it is, and they won’t look away, even though that might give me a clue. It would also mean the end. I think the eyes would disappear back into the darkness.”

I would have gone on, but Barbara asked: “Ask him what he wants. In your mind.” She stared just as intently as I at her.

“There is brown fur around the eyes, and a strong brow. The brow is knitted, intense. I’ve tried to ask the question in my mind, and no response. I don’t know how to speak to the eyes.”

“Of course you don’t,” she said. “There is no expectation that you would. Let the eyes go. They have their own place to go. Now close your eyes. Please, everyone concentrate on John. Go back to the forest, John. Close your eyes there as well. I only want you to hear. A light wind, perhaps. Some distant birds. Needles snapping under your feet. Now ask the question. Ask there and ask here.”

I ahemed into the room beyond my closed lids, and said, “Bog monster, what do you want?”

“Listen,” she said.

“I can’t hear anything, here or there, wherever here is.”

“Ask there again and listen.”

“Nothing,” I said.

“No,” she said. “Lis-SEN. Don’t talk. Listen.”

There was a tiring, ear-bending silence. Nothing.

“Now,” she said, “what would you hear, if the bog monster spoke?”

“Not a voice,” I said.

“Good. What then?”

“A growl. Different tones. I think they communicate through tones.”

“A language?”

“I suppose. Not like ours. Simple. A lot of pointing.”

“Do you see something, John? Are your eyes open?”

I was astounded. “Yes, I guess they are. I can see him next to me.”

“How tall, John?” “Seven feet, maybe. Not massive. The fur makes him seem much larger.”

“How much would you say he understands, John?”

“I would say that he understands as much as I do.”

“Does he want you to understand something?”

“I guess so. He is pointing into the woods. This is his home. All he has left.”

“Is he willing to help us? Does he understand?”

“Like I said, I feel like he understands what I understand. I suppose it helps to be inside my head.”

“If he can help, can he tell us about Hayley Blalock?”

“He doesn’t know anything about her, except that people have been all over that forest looking for her. He’s had to jump patches several times.”

“Did he ever have occasion to see her?”

“No. – He seems grateful to understand why the fuss.”

“What is it,” asked Barbara, “that he would like from us?”

I hesitated, as it took shape in my mind. Then I spoke slowly: “He wants to be given his land. He wants some kind of guarantee – like a handshake, but something recorded, a promise, a contract. He wants more...” Finally in a shout: “Je-SUS, he wants a treaty!” I opened my eyes and shook my head as I looked at Barbara, then Doreen. Where did that come from?

My mind was fogged all the way home and through the rest of the evening. There was not too much to process – more like my brain was afraid of processing anything, especially a potentially painful realization that I had been duped or that I had fooled myself. That moment would be devastating, as I teetered on the edge of believing that something indelible, unbelievable had just happened to me. In the morning I would feel more distance; that would be the right time to process, critique and dismiss.

Doreen and I were in bed with the lights out before we spoke more than half sentences. “John,” she whispered. She waited. “Doreen?” “John, I want you to see someone.” “Who?” I asked. “A specialist.” “A specialist? Do you think I’m nuts?” “It’s not about being nuts, John. This is about mental health.” She finished: “You scared me tonight.”

“I’m sorry, Doreen. I didn’t mean to scare you. But I’m not crazy.”

“John, I am only saying that you might need some help.”

“Why? Because I could imagine what the bog monster is like?”

“It was like the thought was taking you over. That was disconcerting.”

“It was disconcerting for me, too. But it was just the circumstance. Maybe she hypnotized me. Maybe she set this all up the last time I was there.”

“I don’t think so,” said Doreen. Already more sympathy for Barbara than for me.

“Well, why don’t we see how I do. If you find me talking to myself, I’ll see any specialist you want.”

“John, it’s just a suggestion. You’re under a lot of pressure. I just don’t think you’re handling it well.”

“Maybe not,” I said, “but I don’t feel ready for a psychiatrist.”

“How about a psychic?”

Ouch. I let the hit score, and tried redirection: “I didn’t think you were sympathetic to the paranormal.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, John,” she said calmly and firmly.

Maybe, I thought, she is ready to discuss what I don’t know about her on this most unusual of evenings. “Like what?” I asked.

“For one, I have always believed in psychic phenomena. I have felt it myself.”

“Really?” I asked, incredulously. “You’re normally a pretty rational person.”

“Says the person who got his aura profiled. – Sure, I’m rational, but I’m not close-minded. It’s happened to me several times that I’ve thought about someone I haven’t seen for a long time, and they call, or I think about someone, and decide to call, and they just experienced some life-altering event.”

“Like who?”

“Once with my sister Cheryl. I hadn’t seen or talked to her in months, and thought, I had better check in. I called, and she told me she’d just gotten engaged. She hadn’t even told mom or dad.”

“But rationally, you know you have to consider these experiences together with every other moment that has no special meaning. In that context, they look a lot more like coincidence.”

“Okay,” she said, getting up on an elbow and looking at me. “Then what is the story about this gorilla or whatever it is? Do you really think you can talk to Bigfoot?”

“No,” I said. “I know rationally that it’s all chance and suggestion. But the experience, the connection seemed real.”

“John, there’s no chance involved,” she said. “Yes, there’s a reason for everything, and no paranormal explanation is necessary here. This treaty story, that’s pure you. What you attributed to Sasquatch – that’s all you. ‘Give me my space, I need my private space.’”

“Oh, and you don’t need your own space.”

“Sure,” she said, “I need space. But you totally misunderstand if you think it’s meant to keep you out. I need a space where we can do more than talk about Brett and plan our next vacation. I need more.” And before I could raise it – “I need more from you.”

“Fine,” I said, knowing that there was no cost in saying so, because a mechanism for “more” wouldn’t be worked out, not then, not there – not even now.

Doreen felt it, too, and though she might want to say, “Here’s what I want from you,” she knew that there was no way from that discussion to a negotiation. She let it lie, too.

We had flip-flopped positions – I now the rationalist and she the paranormalist – but she saw no contradiction in that because she rationally *believed*, while I irrationally *wanted* to believe. And she was right, of course, a fact that made me sigh deeply. I was ready to let go of the evening and sleep. Doreen wanted to talk some more, but I rolled over and mumbled a good night. I don’t remember if she replied but I was soon unaware.

Three days later, the local paper showed me why this had been a very bad idea. Under his own byline, Barry had penned a story that was headlined: “County Employee Communicates with Bog Monster.” Then in smaller type: “Creature ‘No Longer’ Suspect in Disappearance.” The story meticulously laid out the facts of the case, including Barbara’s involvement, although she benefited from being a nameless “psychic hired by the police.” The narrative of our séance was particularly impressive in its detail. Barbara was the only possible source, unless Barry had planted a mic and recording device in the room. I thought that perfectly possible, but I’m sure he would prefer to interview Barbara in person. And her motivation? It had to be the good press, or failing that, the notoriety. Anonymity would

serve her purposes: findable for those interested, unknown for the skeptics. It was the perfect postmodern packaging, and I the dupe. While everyone else grabbed their piece of the media pie, my reputation cooked away: kooky for my colleagues; bizarre for fellow citizens; of continuing interest for law enforcement; and suspicious to my family.

Still, I didn't call Barry to give him a piece of mind. I could hardly blame him. The treaty-seeking bog monster fit perfectly with his own bizarre notions of Sasquatch, and his quest for bog-monster liberté had almost certainly been at the back of my mind. Let him enjoy his bit, I thought; it's the last thing he'll get from me.

That day was hard – everyone tiptoed around me – but it got worse the following day when I was invited to the Chapel Hill police headquarters. I could hear in my mind over and over again: “Talking to a bog monster, you say, buddy? When are you going to drop the ruse and come clean? Where'd ya bury 'em?”

Detective Horvath met me at the reception area; Officer Brightman was nowhere to be seen. Police Captain Stone shook my hand and then left me in Horvath's good care. A uniformed (albeit in khaki) officer, Sergeant Abigail Frommeyer, joined us in the interview room. She was studiously stony-faced, while Horvath was the jovial BBQ acquaintance.

“Look, John – I can call you John, right, thanks – it does seem like Hayley Blalock is alive. Someone is living off advances on her credit card, which her parents refuse to cut off, slowly making her way to Mexico. Whoever is collecting the money doesn't seem to want to leave the country. I'm afraid that Hayley won't admit it to her boyfriend, but even if she has, José may be afraid of coming back to a felony kidnapping charge. Some day they'll have to commit, one way or another, and I just hope that they can reach an amiable resolution. Too often this kind of thing ends badly.” He paused. “Still, this is mostly good news, right? But since you've come in, I thought we could use your help in clearing up some other cases.” He pointed to a short stack of papers that the policewoman had next to her. It was in that moment that I realized she was an Orange County sheriff's deputy, and that I knew my days of idly walking the county were at an absolute end.

“Mr. Densch,” she said, “I have here a variety of trespass and stalking reports from the Sheriff's Office. The descriptions of the perpetrator resemble each other quite well, and they match you. I can ask you about each individual case and inquire of your whereabouts, or we can clarify this with one general question: Do you have in your possession a surveyor's highway safety vest?” She waited with the same cold expression, even though I must say her voice was much warmer.

“Yes, I do,” I said. Horvath, who must have expected my answer, nevertheless shifted forward in his seat and became more intent.

“Is it reasonable to assume that you may have been involved in some of these cases of trespassing?”

“It is reasonable, although I would have to look at each to be able to answer in specific.”

“Sure,” she said. “Of course. That won't be necessary at this time. A number of these have reached their statute of limitations, even if they could be prosecuted, and the others will be closed with the notation that you stipulated the safety vest. That information will only be passed on to the district attorney if we get more of these reports. Do I make myself clear?” A stony smile.

“Yes,” I said, barely able to stop the “ma'am.”

She looked at Horvath with a half nod.

“Well, John, that really is a surprise,” said Horvath with disingenuous sadness. “That changes everything.”

“I'm not sure why,” I said. “Look, there's a very simple explanation. I work with a map of the county all day and every day. I just wanted to see some of the real county. That's all. I wasn't looking for people, or scouting, or stalking. I was just seeing the real property.”

“Oh sure,” said Horvath. “I understand that perfectly. You see a plot of land on your computer, pull up the owner, value, the improvements, and you wonder, what does this look like? Do they have trees or

a field? Is the house pristine or rundown? Is this still a wood? A field? I understand completely... There's only one problem." A pause. "This puts you anywhere in the county at any time." Another. "There are some cold cases we need to discuss with you." He looked back at Sgt. Frommeyer.

She took two fat notebooks from beneath the table. On each spine was a name and case number. One name was Hillary Bingham, the other Jane Doe #7. I could feel a squirt of debilitating acid in my stomach, and my mouth had the cold metallic taste of blood. "I'd like to ask you about the date of -----, she began. After saying what crime occurred that day, she lifted the top sheet from the stack of trespassing cases. It seems that someone matching my description was in the general area of Hillary's disappearance, trespassing and scaring a woman who was walking her dog on her own property. Now, mind you, "the general area" meant some miles distant, and there were no witness accounts to place this individual closer to the crime. They were fishing, in other words.

"Yes," I said, anxious to iron this out, "that was probably me. I think I remember that afternoon. It was a cool November afternoon, clouded and a bit blustery. I was going to the middle of a large stand of trees – we did have at least one recent satellite overlay at the time, so I could be fairly confident of that – and I remember hearing something, but I never saw anyone so I just continued. I suppose she must have heard me and headed the other way."

"All right," she said. "Were you in the vicinity of _____ that day?"

"No," I replied.

"Can someone provide evidence that you were elsewhere at 5:30pm on that day?"

"I don't know," I said, "I imagine I was on my way home."

"Then no one would be able to say where you were or weren't."

I shook my head. It was a few moments before I realized: "Maybe you can compare when the trespass report was called in. If you can establish when I left that property, maybe we can determine whether I had time to drive to _____ and get home in time for dinner."

"Drive to _____ and attack Hillary Bingham and leave her for dead, you mean?" asked Horvath.

"I guess that's what's meant."

"If you did attack her, what might you use to disable a woman like her? She was 20 years old, five foot six and 150 pounds. There may have been a struggle. What might you have hit her with?"

I looked incredulously at him. "I didn't hit her. I didn't see her. – I don't know why I'm still here, answering these questions. Hayley didn't disappear, after all, and there's no connection between any other disappearance or any attack and me. Sure, I like to walk and see parts of the county that are private property. That doesn't make me capable of any of the things you're implying. It's just crazy."

"Did I say that Hayley hasn't disappeared?"

"You said that she's alive and using her credit card. That doesn't sound like she disappeared."

"Right," said Horvath. "I suppose so, if you think disappearance must mean murder, or if you have reason to believe that, John. – Anyway, the Mexico story is what her parents believe. We still have her listed as a missing person, under suspicious circumstances."

Frommeyer looked uncomfortable with this turn.

"Okay," I said, "I'd like to go now."

Horvath pointed to the door.

I got up and went to the door, feeling awkward and unsure. How does one act when every simple motion feels like pulling iron chains through water, when you know that every little gesture can be misinterpreted as arrogance or guilt or indifference? As I opened the door, Horvath called out: "John, sometime you should explain to me why didn't you tell us earlier."

I turned. "What?"

"That your son knows Hayley. I'm told she was his girlfriend a while back."

That was the lowest point, maybe even the lowest point of my life. I didn't imagine for a second, Brett, that you were involved with Hayley's disappearance. But I was saddened by how little that I knew about your life, and my heart ached because I knew the police were not going to pull any punches. The threat was unmistakable. If they thought they couldn't get me directly, they'd go after you.

I got in the car and drove back to work. I could muster no surprise when told that I was being put on administrative leave. In fact, I was pleasantly surprised when Richard, my boss, said that it was paid leave – maybe the police hadn't let them know about my wanderings under the guise of official duty.

"I'm sorry, John," he said, "but the county's counsel says we have to take steps. You understand."

"Sure," I said.

He looked at me, for a moment feeling that he had to say, I know you didn't do it, but unable to bring himself to say it. I saw the moment and did nothing to ease it for him. I guess I was equally trapped by my bitterness.

I left everything lie on my desk – it was temporary, after all – and headed out the front. I opened the outside door and held it for a woman standing just to the parking lot side of the door. No irrational behavior from me.

"John Densch?" she said.

It took a moment before it registered. "Excuse me?" I said, hoping she wasn't saying, hey, didn't I see something about your criminal genius in the paper?

"Mr. Densch?" she asked earnestly.

"Yes," I said, awkwardly still holding the door.

She moved back a few steps, and I let the door whoosh shut. I was rather suspicious, but she had a very business-like, one might even say officious, manner, such that there were whole categories of suspicions that I was able to let go. But was she FBI? Some moral police that I'd never heard tell of?

"My name is Samantha Ogg."

"Ock?"

"Og-g-uh," she said crisply but with irritation.

"I'm sorry," I said. I'd never had a very good ear and this one put me to the test. I looked at her expecting more.

"I'm here today to speak with you on the business of the Triangle Association of Scientists and Teachers of Science." She cracked a weak smile.

In my state of malaise, I was taken aback, so much so that I almost burst out with a gallows laugh: Now what!

"We are a committed group, dedicated to the furtherment of the sciences and to the reduction of irrationalism in the populace. We are not anti-religion, except where it oversteps its epistemological boundaries and demands the suspension of rational understanding."

"Are you looking for a contribution?" I asked hesitantly, no doubt with a threatening guffaw on my lips.

"Not at all, Mr. Densch." She held up a forearm in a somewhat declaratory gesture. "We are asking you to do the right thing and publicly disassociate yourself from the recent stories about an alleged bog monster inhabiting the triangle region. Such stories, with their inevitable psychic babble and paranormal trappings, do nothing but encourage the broader public in its tendencies toward irrationality, fear and self-delusion."

"You want me to disavow the séance I attended? There were two police detectives in attendance, Ms. Oggie. I was an invited participant; I didn't ask for it. And I haven't said anything about it publicly."

"Yes, all true, Mr. Densch – it's Og-guh – but the report in the paper turns on your performance. If you had not described Sasquatch as your psychic double, the story never would have been carried. Mr. Densch, you did a disservice to yourself that evening, but more importantly a disservice to the cause of

science and societal progress. The broadest swath of citizens believes in Bigfoot, UFOs and pyramid power, even while they are entrusted with the governance of the greatest social experiment in human history. They do not need educated professionals pandering to their irrationality.”

“I didn’t do the pandering – Ms. Og-ck.” I was tired and irritated, and I could hear it in my own voice.

She looked at me, a bit nonplussed that I could be arguing the point. I studied her expression for a while, then – when she did not go on – I offered: “I understand your concerns. My life would be infinitely simpler if the whole misunderstanding had not taken hold. So – believe me, I’m very sympathetic. But I am now a ‘person of interest’ to the police for incomprehensible reasons, and I’ve just been put on administrative leave here at my job. I don’t think now is the time for me to make public statements. I’ve got to find a lawyer.”

Samantha Ogg was a short woman, with a wide waist and, as far as I could tell beneath her generous skirt, strong stocky legs. She had long and heavy-set arms, which she used in rather stochastic gestures. She wore a loose top with no discernible bosom, and wore her thick broom-blond hair brushed back but otherwise unbundled. The most distinctive part of her attire was her bright winged eyeglasses: they seemed to have survived decades of mere bad taste to become undeniably but unintentionally retro-cool.

I estimated her in her forties, although there was something so refreshingly purposeful in her manner that I was willing to drop fifteen years off my estimate.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said in quick tones. You could tell that she wasn’t prepared concede that I was the victim here, since she had come with such aspirations to right wrongs. “I’m disappointed to hear of these consequences from such an unfortunate misconstrual.” There was also something of the “you play with fire” accusation in this, but I could tell from her expression that she was genuinely burdened by my plight, if only in the way one might mourn a bird, dead in front of a plate glass door.

“Since it would be wrong to ask your help under such circumstances,” she continued, “I would like to know if there is some way in which I could help you.”

This is, of course, where in a hundred celluloid dialogs the worldly-wise hero says something like, “Sure, toots, you can get those lousy coppers off my tail.” I wasn’t feeling so jovial as to play the role, nor did she seem to deserve it. “I don’t think so, but thank you, Ms. Og-ck, for your offer.”

“All right, then,” she said, and did a half turn before freezing, as if a run-away thought had usurped her brain as completely as the blue screen of death captures a Windows computer. “Perhaps,” she said after a few moments, enough time for me to wonder if it would be rude to just walk away, “I could speak with you as a private citizen. Then when this matter is cleared up, we would be able to move quickly to quell the misunderstandings about the bog monster.”

“Sure,” I said. “That would be fine.”

Still partially turned: “Lunch then?”

I didn’t understand immediately. “What – you mean right now?”

“If you’re free,” she said, half smiling at the irony.

I didn’t know what to say. I really wanted to go home, lick my wounds, and sift through and organize my thoughts, with the hopes of protecting my mind against feeling personally and irrevocably responsible for this horrible turn of events. On the other side of the equation: lunch with this woman with whom I had nothing in common except that we both thought this bog monster an invented disaster. On the one side, my own space to ruminate and cogitate; on the other, human contact and perhaps sympathy. For me, not an easy decision.

“All right,” I said finally, “that sounds fine.”

We negotiated meeting fifteen minutes later at a Chinese restaurant in Durham; I needed to go by an ATM. The drive was an opportunity to weigh the choices and make another decision, but it seemed too caddish to leave her standing. She was waiting when I entered the restaurant.

“Okay then, we’ll just get a table.” She hadn’t yet requested a table for two; it seems that she was familiar with my temptation.

I followed her back to the table and we sat across from each other.

“So, Ms. Og-ck,” I began, to avoid silence.

“Please,” she jumped in, “call me Samantha.” In her voice, there was audible relief at getting past the awkwardness around her last name.

“Good. I’m John. So, Samantha, tell me about yourself. – You obviously know a lot about me.”

“Oh,” she said. “All right then. There’s not much to tell. I am a staff scientist at the EPA facility in Morrisville. I’m a biochemist. My husband and I live in Raleigh – we enjoy the benefits of urban living, shows and museums and the like. No children. We have lived here about 15 years, well, 16 next August. I’ve been involved with the association ten years, and I’m at present the chapter president. That’s why I’m here. Our executive committee agreed that this case demanded action.” She smiled embarrassedly, remembering that she had agreed to hold off.

“Where are you from?”

She was confused for a moment, then said: “Cleveland, originally. We much prefer the warmer climate here. Donald would as soon move farther south, but there aren’t any appropriate labs south of here. The CDC, perhaps, in Atlanta, but I much prefer the environment to contagions.”

“What does Donald do?”

“He’s a writer, a technical writer. Manuals mostly. He works at home. Contract work. It pays well when he’s working. When he’s not, well, we tend to eat much better.” An ambiguous smile.

“He’s a good cook?”

“Yes. He is. When he’s working we usually eat out. Neither of us has the energy to face the kitchen after work, or when we’ve got a show to see, or when we just want to go to a bookstore.”

“Sounds like a good life.”

“Certainly,” she said, as if she was wondering where I was going, I suppose because she usually gets the ‘and when are the little ones coming’ question at this point.

“So – what does your society do? Are you usually engaged on such a micro level, influencing individual citizens?”

“Oh, we have activities on all levels – from individual interventions to inner-city summer camps to Washington lobbyists. It’s a full-service organization,” she said with a smile.

“All in the name of science?”

“Science, yes,” she said, “but more it’s about the scientific method and rationality. As I said, we’re not anti-religion and we’re not in the business of dictating morality. We see our role as fighting bad discourse – religious thought masquerading as science, irrational ideas presented as logical reasoning, political sloganeering distorting scientific studies, and the like.”

“Sounds maybe less like the promotion of science and more like philosophy.”

“We’re in favor of the *philosophy* of science, and *rational political engagement*. We’re not modern-science bigots, Mr. – John. Rationality is the father of science, and rational discourse the gift of the scientific method.”

“There’s a lot of confidence in that, Samantha. Don’t you ever find yourselves disagreeing so much you have to doubt rationality just a little bit?”

She chuckled. “Sounds like you’ve been to some of our meetings. But, no. Rationality does not mean ‘no disagreement.’ Rationality means, on the one hand, repeatable experiments according to the scientific method and, on the other, discussion, argument, disagreement among the humans who interpret their results. We are none of us as smart alone as we are together. Our obligation is to remember that an idea that we cannot test or *contest* can never be a human truth.”

“That’s pretty heady stuff before lunch,” I said. The waitress, standing beside the table, had let Samantha finish; we ordered our food.

Our conversation lagged after that point, until I offered to tell the whole story of the bog monster, and she accepted. She had informed herself, and was able to anticipate many of the things I had to tell. When I got to the séance and described how it was that I ‘channeled’ the monster, she kept nodding as if I were confessing to her.

That notion made me ask: “It seemed real. Is it wrong to at least consider the reality of one’s experiences?”

“Is it wrong,” she repeated. “There are so many ways. Our senses are constantly being fooled – they’re simply inadequate to the task of disambiguating causal relationships in this world. If you are an animal, it suffices to know that fire burns; you run when you see a forest fire. But if you are human, you must master fire. Believing it is the fourth element, or something that a trickster god has left to us, is simply insufficient. You need to get past what it looks like and understand what it is doing. As a form of oxidizing – it is a pure version of what happens all over and everywhere in our bodies. Our senses can’t begin to tell you that –”

“Although,” I cut in, with a sandwich dill in my hand serving to punctuate my point, “there are all sorts of fire-in-the-belly metaphors, and things like that. People naturally make that connection.”

“All right, but do you want a barber-doctor who believes your fever is caused by the element of fire, which he will lessen through the application of leeches, or a medical doctor who has medicines that will kill the bacteria attacking your body?”

“Well, what if I prefer a medical doctor, but still believe there are unexplained things in this world, things that may belong to our naïve sense of the paranormal?”

“That’s it exactly,” she said, moving forward in her seat and shaking her head for a moment like an excited child, “you’ve put your finger on it. That’s exactly what we cannot allow ourselves. *Of course*, there are unexplained things in the world. *Of course*, what we don’t understand seems magical or strange. But we cannot say, okay, science hasn’t made it to this point so I’m free to be irrational. No, exactly not. I acknowledge that there are limits to science, and I may wish to believe in a religious tradition because it offers comfort or because I have been raised in that tradition. But I cannot say, the monster felt real so it must be. No. Your feelings are ambiguous; you could as easily convince yourself that Mickey Mouse is real if you rely on what your mind tells you. You *must* disambiguate. The real is not the ambiguous.”

“The real is not the ambiguous. Hmmm. But what if I don’t recognize it as ambiguous – it just felt real.”

“But you had your rational doubts, did you not?”

“I did.”

“That’s why this point is so important, John. All around us, people are insinuating that it is okay to go with the ambiguous, the felt, and the imagined. At the same time, we are facing a cold hard reality that is telling us to be more cautious, more circumspect. Take the automobile, John. An immense infrastructure, the result of a century of collective scientific and technical knowledge and the labor of many millions, makes it possible for you to zip along the freeway at 55 miles an hour. You play your radio, look out the window and hum to yourself. Your body and your senses tell you that you are at rest, and it seems as if nothing could happen to you while you’re in the car. You feel invincible. But in fact the momentum stored in your body would kill you in an instant, should your progress be stopped by a larger and harder object. You may be tempted to forget this fact, but at your own peril. You know better than to direct that car at a wall, but not because of what your senses are telling you. That’s what this struggle is all about.”

I let the lesson sit, and looked out the window. Then I gave her a glance that I hope told her I was not ungrateful for her interest in me. I could only conclude: “I feel like a train wreck right now.”

I was standing in the kitchen, drinking coffee and looking out the window, when you stormed into the house. You were utterly surprised to see me there and had the expression: did something happen to mom? I felt enough irritation at that that I didn't let you off the hook right away. Finally you said, "Hi dad." Then you stutter-stepped to the fridge and took the milk out. You had a big cookie in your lunch bag, for some reason, and you sat down to milk and a cookie.

"Brett," I said, trying my best to be equanimous, "I was told today that you are familiar with Hayley Blalock."

You looked at me with overly knitted brow.

"That's the girl who disappeared. Whose disappearance led to the séance. And whose continuing absence means the police keep asking me questions."

You were chewing again. And?

"Why didn't you tell me you knew her?"

"I-dun-no." Did you ask me?

"I was told she was your girlfriend."

"What!" you let out, along with some milk and crumb remnants. After you got your reaction under control and mopped up a bit with a napkin, you explained: "I knew a Hayley, maybe that Hayley, in fourth or fifth grade. She was in afterschool, I think. But she wasn't my girlfriend, even if such a thing were possible. I guess it's the same girl. She looks different."

"How did you know her?"

"We had afterschool together. Probably."

"Anything else? Why would someone say she was your girlfriend?"

"I really don't know. I went to a birthday party, I think. Maybe that."

I thought about that for a moment, with a growing inkling. "Who else was in afterschool, and might have gone to that party?"

You had a skeptical expression, like, how am I supposed to know that?

"Jared?"

You looked distracted, then: "I suppose. He was in afterschool, too."

Derek sat watching Click-Cluck. It was something he enjoyed: the undulations of her antennae, the way her black forearms rubbed each other when she was distracted, her slightly cockeyed stance because the left rear leg locked in a different position than the others – all the little idiosyncrasies were familiar, endearing, in their own way humanizing. While he watched her he sometimes remembered his high-school girlfriend, distractedly working on some project, projecting an equal number of unique, unintended but pleasant attributes. He reminisced about a certain look she gave him, and the following smile that always sealed the deal for him – and just as quickly he remembered there was no smile coming here.

He knew she had been receiving reports about his nocturnal visitor. No one had asked him about it, but that was just a matter of time. 'Are you losing it, Derek?' He couldn't answer with any assurance either way, but he wasn't going to give up the company.

He knew Click-Cluck couldn't guess what he was going to tell her now, unless she was observing him when away. 'Click-Cluck,' he said, pronouncing her name in his best Bug.

'Yes, Derek?'

"You should know that I've accepted a dinner invitation."

She rearranged her body so that her two antennae had a better bead on him.

'You have done what?'

"Your boss contacted me – through the television projector – and invited me to dinner. I've accepted."

He waited to see what her antennae did. Nothing. Maybe she wasn't surprised after all.

‘Why did you accept?’

‘He said that I will be able to meet other intelligent alien life forms. And he might even take me to the surface.’

Still nothing. She rotated again and went back to her business, as if to say, well, that’s done. I can scratch this hopeless cause off my schedule.

‘That’s it?’

‘You made your mind up, Derek. I won’t bother you further about it.’

‘I thought you might try to dissuade me.’

‘Why?’

‘He’s dangerous, you said.’

‘When he can control you this way he is far less dangerous.’

‘You don’t think he’ll take this chance to get rid of me?’

‘His primary goal is control. I think you will understand when you meet these aliens.’

‘And you won’t counter offer?’

‘kkkenterrr-odzerr?’ she clicked.

‘Counter offer. Try to get me to give up his offer by making your own. Maybe arranging something similar for me?’

‘I have nothing to offer,’ she said. More precisely: ‘my for you sole and unaided self.’

‘Are you there?’ asked Derek. He waited for the voice in his head.

‘Of course.’

‘Don’t you ever sleep?’

‘It’s all just time – I can respond any time I want and you wouldn’t know the difference. I might be responding to you before we have even met. How’s that for a mindbender?’

‘It seems rather ridiculous. Suspicious. Why is it that you have a sense of humor just like mine, for instance?’

‘I would laugh if I could. Don’t forget, Derek, that your own brain is putting this discussion together. We are both human, but our languages and our experiences don’t match one iota. You will have to hear my story soon enough. It’s your mind that is making sense of our discussion, and it can only do so in terms that it understands. Consider it similar to dreaming: You know everything coming at you is a series of stored experiences, but still when they play back in a dream they carry a meaning that goes beyond the superficial stream. Here, you believe you are hearing a stream from me, but you yourself are providing the narrative. Just don’t forget there is someone at the other end, trying to make sense of things, too.’

‘I’ve accepted the invitation I told you about. I’m going to meet with Thunk. He’s promised to let me meet some intelligent aliens. He might even take me to the surface. – He seemed very agreeable.’

‘That’s nice.’

‘Still,’ said Derek. ‘I can’t help thinking that this is a trap, a mistake. Why was Click-Cluck so calm? Is she in on it? Or am I a lost cause? – What do you think?’

‘I can only reflect back what you tell me. I have no idea what’s at stake or what you’re not thinking of. I suspect that Click-Cluck would tell you if this was more dangerous than the alternatives. It might just be something you have to go through.’

‘I guess.’ Then: ‘So – tell me some more about you. I want to understand.’

‘I will, but I need to tell you the story in order – that may sound strange, given what I said before – but I think your brain will do better with what I have to say if it gets the pieces in order. Are you willing to take this one step at a time?’

‘Sure.’

“I ask because my listeners tend to be impatient. I won’t be overlong, but if you don’t think of this as a story you tend to want to compress the parts to get a whole. I have only the parts.”

“One part at a time. I’ve got time.”

“Time is exactly the point, cowboy. You think you have time because you have a measure of days. Days are just the beginning. You have to begin to think on a cosmic scale. Galaxies come, galaxies go. The only constant?”

“The passage of time?”

“Time is nothing, Derek. Energy is everything. And the control of energy is the control of everything. I am the keeper of the light, he who controls the energy of life.”

Doreen and I sat in the living room – which we never did – and the silence comforted – me at least. Earlier, when she came home, she had asked me what was wrong and listened to my story. Then she asked her questions. We ate a fairly calm dinner, and you went to do your homework.

“A lawyer, then,” she said.

“Yes, I’ve got to find one.”

“Let me talk to our house counsel. I can get a recommendation.”

I looked her in the eyes. “I want you to know that I have done nothing wrong.” Then, after a sufficient pause: “Except the trespassing thing. It’s stupid, I know, but there’s nothing to it. I promise you.”

“I have to say that I wondered,” she said. “Sometimes I’d call and you wouldn’t even know I had left a message. And I felt I couldn’t ask you.”

“I understand,” I said, for the lack of something better.

She hadn’t said that she knew I had done nothing wrong, but in a parallel way I couldn’t ask about that.

The silence, rather than distance us, seemed to bring us together that evening. We were mute before the future and not knowing whether we would be sitting together in a year’s time. We basked in the glow of the good in our marriage, even as we teetered on the edge of my life’s dissolution.

All of a sudden, I heard her sob. She was already trying to wipe her eyes clear when I looked.

I felt helpless. “I’m sorry,” I said.

“That damn monster,” she said weakly, and smiled at me for the irony of making it real just so that she could damn it.

Things can move quickly in the legal world when they must. I had an interview with a lawyer the next afternoon. He came highly recommended, “though he’s not everyone’s cup of tea.” I didn’t know what that meant, but Doreen said: “I think in this case that can only be a good thing.” There were a couple other choices, should I not feel comfortable with Mr. Kettle, but I got the sense they might be less available. A bit of professional sharing of the wealth with this recommendation?

Again I faced the question: How do you communicate innocence? Do you pretend this is no big deal? Do you dress the Sunday penitent? I opted for the ol’ work clothes, though not the *old* work clothes.

I was quite underdressed, as I surmised in the waiting room. His secretary was thin, smartly dressed in lustrous rayon, attractively coifed with long brunette curls, and expertly made up, though perhaps with too much blue eye shadow, given her crows’ feet and the obscured circles under her eyes. “Mr. Kettle will be with you shortly,” then the obsequious smile that you may think extinct, Brett, but you will come to realize has been preserved for a different class of people.

He came in from the outside and greeted Ms. Van, then disappeared into his office. She avoided my glance and went back to typing at the computer.

The door popped open five minutes later. “John,” he said with force, as if we knew each other. Or maybe there was a question in it.

In any case, he strode to me and we shook hands. “Come in, come in,” he said, and showed me the way with his hand. I assumed the two of them exchanged glances behind my back.

I took a seat opposite his desk, the Wake Forest law degree behind him and a few rows of law volumes that looked as much prop as resource.

He sat down, and then much to my surprise took to straightening some paperweights on his desk. I waited for him to say something. “Go ahead,” he said with a brief glance.

I didn’t expect that. I must say I didn’t really expect him either: ten – fifteen years my junior, a compact but wiry looking body, a sharp jaw but somewhat uneven face, as if there were a bit of paralysis. He wore his hair simply, a mop cut that made him look even younger than he was, despite the gel he put in it. He already had a five o’clock shadow. His suit looked fine but somehow didn’t sit right.

His eyes seemed to be coal black. I was half afraid that he was high, but I decided he had very dark irises.

I cleared my throat, then said: “You probably know about the Hayley Blalock disappearance.”

“I do,” he replied, and reached directly for the stereotypical yellow legal pad. A new one. His eyes finally settled on me.

I tried to describe the sequence as best as I could. He looked pensive throughout, wrote things when I was stuttering, and seemed to be lost in thought when I gave the meat of the matter: “They think I’m hiding something. But really, I just liked seeing what the county looks like in real life.”

“Hmmm. Why didn’t you just use a satellite photo service?”

“It’s not the same,” I said.

“No, it’s not. Did they read you your rights?”

“They did not.”

“Did you answer all their questions?”

“I did, until they suggested I might want a lawyer.”

“Uh huh,” he said, and drew a line under something. “That’s when they surprised you with the tidbit about your son?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you think they are interested in you?”

“Like I said, I think they think I’m hiding something.”

“Okay. But there is probably something else. Does someone not like you? Did you sass them? Do you beat your wife? Is your son sadistic toward little animals? We’re at the point where the police will look at anything to try to find corroborating evidence, even if it’s not admissible. They want to be sure themselves before they go to the trouble of finding the legal evidence they need. So – you’re in the gut stage. Someone has it in his or her gut that you’re guilty of something.”

“I guess I am, because of the trespassing. I don’t think they understand.”

He took a big breath and sighed. “John, I’ve got some news for you. Nobody’s going to understand that. I don’t. A jury sure as hell won’t. You are going to have to give up the notion that you’re an innocent who is unjustly charged here. In the court of public opinion, which is exactly where we are right now, you’re guilty until proven innocent. Things get better in a court of law, but not much. The facts and rules of evidence speak there, but they are nothing without a story. Nothing but chatter.” He sized me up, I think, to see if he should continue or spare me. “By way of example, let’s imagine they charge you with one or the other serious crime, and you refuse the plea deal. And believe me, they’ll jack up the charges just to make sure you take the plea. But let’s say you insist on your innocence, damn the consequences. Let’s even imagine that the evidence is shaky. I’ve still got to be careful about impugning the state because those fine people in the jury don’t want to believe that you’re sitting at the

defense table because of some cop's gut feeling. They'll listen hard to understand the story the state is telling. And they'll be skeptical of our story, even before they hear your little tale of trespassing.

"The prosecutor and I will exchange eloquent closing statements. She'll say: 'You must convict this invidious criminal, this sociopath masquerading as one of us.' And I'll reply: 'This is all a huge mistake, a remarkable series of coincidences that you must see through.' Then the judge will take his turn addressing the jury. 'Members of the jury, it's my job to tell you what you need to do to determine innocence or guilt, but it will be up to you to make sense of the evidence presented here. The prosecutor has given you a story about how the defendant committed the crime; the defense attorney has given you another about how the evidence leads to his innocence. You must weigh these stories and choose the more coherent one. *This* is the reasonable doubt test. You are not here to come up with your own theories about what *could* have happened, or to surrender before an unknowable past. You can reject this or that detail, but you are obliged to find one of these two stories reasonable. Only then is your job done.' Do you get it? Reasonable doubt is the misnomer here. Greater doubt is the more accurate test."

All I could think was: guilty.

"All right, then, John, what's our story?"

But there was nothing else I could say. "I wasn't anywhere near the crimes – I was just exploring the county."

He half sighed and started writing on his pad. "That'll have to do."

"It's the truth," I protested under my breath.

He wrote a while longer. "The truth is a luxury we don't have, Mr. Densch." He looked up but continued writing. "Justice has little relationship to truth. 'Beauty is truth, and truth beauty. That is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.' That has a nice ring to it, and it makes some sense, since both are abstractions with a vague definition and a vaguer function. Justice is concise. It is the administration of rules in the spirit of the principles that inspired them." He stopped writing and looked me in the eye. "Did that make sense to you? Our principles may have their roots in vague ideas of truth and equality, but we have to be able to articulate these principles in order to make rules that match them. The belief in truth is just the hope that everything will work out. But justice is concrete: describe your first principles, such as 'innocent until proven guilty,' derive your rules from them, and then apply the derived rules in that same spirit. Voila. Justice."

I didn't know what to do with that. "Can I at least get justice?"

"Oh, I can assure you that. I will see that justice is served. Whether justice ends up pleasing you, or matches your hopeful sense of the truth, that I cannot guarantee."

I looked at him, aghast.

His face was frozen for the next five seconds as he realized he'd talked himself out of another job. Then he smiled grimly as he considered how to undo the damage. "Of course, I will do everything in my power to assure the result we want. In fact, I can't imagine this case will go to trial. There will be no plea, either, because they'll never charge you, or if they do, they'll withdraw the charge."

"Why are you so positive all of a sudden?"

"Because we'll beat them at their own game. They want a PR war – they'll get one."

I looked at him, waiting for the explanation.

"We will be the first to find Hayley on the lam, in some sunny western clime, and they'll be too embarrassed to charge you with anything."

Derek communicated with Thunk and his bug associates via the cloud projector TV. When it was his time to reply, a large image of a typewriter would appear. Each key was the size of a playing card, but he got used to writing that way and could bang out a reply quickly. Thunk communicated through written English, rudimentary and often cryptically ill chosen, but mostly grammatical. Derek guessed a computer did the translating.

For instance: “We will accost with haste borne on wind.”

Derek assumed that meant: “You’re on your way?”

“Yes, with gratitude.”

“I’ll be ready.”

“Pleasant thoughts.”

Derek waited quietly, squatting in the corner, his radar glasses perched on his nose but off his eyes. Clug-Cluk-Tock was nowhere to be seen, perhaps purposively pulled off the case, perhaps innocently otherwise occupied. An hour or so passed, then all of a sudden the floor latch opened and three bugs eased themselves into the chamber. They were big bugs and had a certain thuggish quality – random deep scratching on their hides, bulging legs, thicker slower-moving antennae that looked like stretched whips – that made the room seem rather small.

They were clicking at him, but he couldn’t understand. He thought he heard ‘your following of us,’ but it could as easily have been ‘stupid mammal, your desired following of us to your death.’ One foumped down through the opening, then another. The third waited for Derek, who repositioned his glasses, stood up and eased himself onto his vehicle, then hovered forward and down. He moved slowly into the tunnel, and could see the two earlier bugs ahead. They had activated some kind of marker that allowed him to track them visually. The third bug was still speaking to him, advising him to enter the traffic stream. All four began the journey in earnest.

The journey lasted for quite a while. Derek had figured out how to tune in bug TV on his visors, and so he could occupy himself with his relatively fruitless attempts to understand the self-representation of bug culture. The language was still usually too difficult – he suspected sometimes that Click-Cluck had taught him a private or oversimplified language – and the visual images did not seem to tell a story. In fact, the screen usually showed no movement and sometimes showed an indistinct tableau and sometimes an overly close-in shot at a bug or a rock or a console or who knows what. He couldn’t figure out how to get to his earth video library from his headset.

The trip along the channel was mundane but he felt with every minute how he was moving farther away from his mentor. She and he both knew the risks. He couldn’t be sure that he would ever see her again.

Chatter woke him from a fitful half-sleep, and he realized they were readying to leave the tunnel for a smaller side shoot. In fact, they diverged into ever-smaller side shoots, as if suddenly in a giant colony or a city. When the tunnel was no wider than a single bug, they came to a near stop. The first bug turned off to the side and released a door, through which they each in turn passed. The style of this domicile was different than what Derek was used to: high chamber; slick, angular walls; furniture, such as it would be for the horizontal bodies of bugs; and absolutely no light. They passed through another door, one which opened itself, into a larger chamber with similar characteristics. A number of bugs were already in attendance, including one that Derek thought he recognized. Thunk.

Derek approached, but his escorts peeled off and disappeared.

None of the bugs approached him, but Derek realized Thunk was already communicating through the screen on his visor.

“Welcome here, earthener.”

Derek didn’t know how to reply through his visor, so he tried to speak: ‘My joy at arrival,’ a greeting he had heard others give.

“Speak please not our language, although I may beg.”

That sentence alone gave him a feeling for why they may not have wanted him speaking their language either.

A big cloud projection appeared, and a keyboard floated at his head level.

The conversation continued on the pleasantry level, with no apparent purpose, until Derek noticed that one shape in the room was not a bug.

He hadn't noticed the creature at first because it was supine and fairly covered in metallic bands and swaths of cloth. It might have been mistaken for an injured or misshapen bug beneath the accouterments, if not for the uncovered face. There was a configuration – not like earth fauna, but reminiscent enough – that you knew was a collection of sensory and feeding organs. It was symmetric, with two closed slits that were likely eyes and two separate open slits that looked like nostrils. The mouth seemed to be underneath the chin, or on the bottom of the main part of the face. There was no hair, but the skin seemed to have nodules rowed upon each other, like giant goose bumps. The nodules were muted red in color, but the skin beneath flashed deep blue and red, in occasional patterns like an octopus or cuttlefish. Behind and above the facial features were two nearly separate globular lobes that seemed have popped out of cranial bones. The body was probably five feet long and had four equal but lengthy appendages that began somewhere near the midpoint. It did not move; the eyes never opened. Derek slowly noticed wires and devices affixed to the brain lobes.

“What is wrong with your guest?” he wrote.

“No wrong thing. The guest chooses to feel at home.”

“It is asleep?”

“Dreamed.”

“Dreaming?”

“Always dreaming. Very relaxed.”

“Okay. Is it not well? Can we speak with it?”

“Communication takes later possibility.”

At that point, Thunk caused the projector to recede, and the bugs floated up on their discs and led the way into another hall. There were two banks with a recessed area between them. When Derek dismounted and took his place among the bugs, he recognized this as an eating situation: slop of various hues and consistencies was arrayed in the middle of the depression. The bugs would reach out with a large leg, holding something that resembled a Spackle knife, and scoop up portions. When they had what they wanted, their little head arms would form and feed little balls to the mouth. A lot of clicking as the mouths worked, not substantively different than their language but much more monotone. After a time, Derek picked out speech between the munching.

A special bowl was passed around, and each bug took a small food ball and ate it before passing the bowl on. Derek did the same. This was very different than the bland stuff that he was accustomed to eating: stiffer and prickly to the touch, it smelled musty and rotten, and tasted and felt like a layer of mold dissolving on his tongue. The slop was a welcome contrast afterward.

After a substantial time, no one was eating any more, and the conversation was widespread and diffuse like the roar of a field of grasshoppers. Derek had no chance to participate, so he decided to just relax. He was certain that Thunk would address him when the time was right. The conversation went on and on, until Derek thought the bugs were falling into a whisper. In fact, it seemed as if his ears were covered by invisible boxes, auditory chambers, into which the bug speech could only echo. Then he grew aware that his vision was graying in the visor, and his skin felt as if every nerve was numbing.

Poisoned, he thought. Or drugged. His breath was getting shallow, and his heart seemed to be experimenting with stopping its beat for a while. A cold sweat spread out from his forehead to his whole upper body. He didn't think he could move – his muscles were balking, and his brain was felt as if it was locked in motionlessness by the inertia of a gaggle of flywheels.

So it ends, he thought and waited. – Was that a voice? Into the perfect silence the high points of a human voice. Then a hushed series of syllables. Finally a calm and quiet soliloquy, a voice he thought he recognized, hovering somewhere over him. He realized his eyes were closed and he was lying on his back. Or at least it seemed so.

Wait. “Mom?”

“Oh my God,” he heard.

“Mom?” He tried to open his eyelids, though it felt like that action threatened to flip his whole body off into space. “Mom, I can’t see you.”

“Derek,” the voice said. “Just wait – I’m getting the doctor.” He heard shuffling, voices, clangs, a buzzer, other indistinct sounds. He thought it was seconds, but it was as if his mind was shouting “much later...”

He opened his eyes. He was not lying on his back, but sitting in a chair. His body was covered by a blanket, and his arms were nestled with bands over them on concave armrests. It was some kind of wheel chair. Slowly the voices became distinct, and his tunnel vision expanded: there were two attendants dressed in white, and his mother, and another person who looked like the authority figure in this drama, a doctor of some kind, a well-dressed trim middle-aged woman with the manner of someone used to control.

He looked from one to the next, disbelieving, unable to muster the strength or resolve or concentration to activate his vocal cords. His mother’s hands went up to her mouth, as if she was afraid to break a spell or an illusion. She was waiting to hear his voice. “Mom,” he said finally, hoarsely, triumphantly. She slowly melted into a sob and covered her face.

“Hello, Derek,” the doctor said. “I am so glad to meet you.”

She was smiling so he tried to do the same. But it was more important: “Where – am – I?”

The doctor delayed just for a moment. “Derek, you are in the Oregon State Mental Hospital.”

He looked at her with some concern that this was all wrong, even while he was beginning to recognize that this was exactly – exactly – what he had expected all those days that he doubted the bug world.

His eyes told her that he needed more explanation and that he was ready to hear the truth. “You have been a resident here for half a year. You were in a coma for some months, then one day your body came alive, sometimes violently, and we had to bring you here to provide the right environment for caring for you.”

He said: “I’ve – been – dreaming.”

“So it would seem,” she said. She approached and put a hand on his shoulder. “You have been missed here, Derek. I know there must be many questions. But let’s take it slowly. I don’t want you to overdo it. There is some danger, if we aren’t careful, that the problems will return. That could mean more dreaming.” She glanced at one of the attendants. “Randall has been providing care for you the whole while you’ve been here. He’ll take you back and put you in your bed. I would like you to sleep. He’ll give you something to help with that. I’ll escort your mother to her car. She’s been here every day since you came, and she’ll be back tomorrow to see you again. Could you say goodbye to her? I’m sure that that would mean so much.”

Derek nodded in agreement to all. “Bye – mom.”

She leaned over him and gave him a tear-soaked kiss on his cheek. The wetness itched on his skin.

When he woke up, he knew intuitively that it was early the next day. He was on a bed in a well-lit but sterile white room, smelling of chlorine and must; the sheets were stiff and starched but clean. The sky was cumulus gray through the window. Somewhere a clock was ticking, and voices rumbled in with car noises and clatter and steps. He let the reality sink in. Steps against the tiles. Legs and shoes. Humans. He lay for a long time, although when he thought back he could not remember what had occupied him. Probably still weak from the illness or accident or whatever it was. There was no mirror in this room to see if his face was damaged. He found no bandages on his body, but that did not mean much at this point; an examination for scars would have to wait.

Randall looked in the window in the door, and opened it with the clank of a lock. Oh yes. The walls were now on closer inspection lightly padded. The sheets were thick paper. No glass in this room, either. Precautions.

“Good morning, Derek.” He stopped half way in the room. Derek imagined that he usually found his patient in safety bands. Randall was a big fellow but on the heavy side and probably not all that handy with rampaging patients.

“Good morning, Randall. I’m happy to see you.” His voice was still hoarse but not as weak as yesterday.

“Shall we get some breakfast, Derek?”

Sure, he thought and made to lift his upper body. The strain on his muscles was immediate – even if this body had been flailing non-stop the usual motions were no easier than if he had lain still in a coma.

“Oooh,” he moaned.

“Still kinda hard? It’ll take some therapy, I think.” Randall was at his bedside, but willing to wait until he felt better.

“What,” asked Derek with a breath in the middle, “happened to me?”

“Oh,” said Randall, raising the upper part of the bed. “I don’t think Doctor Warren would want me to talk about that.”

“Why not?”

“She doesn’t want you getting upset. Something about your brain. It’s kinda tender.”

“What made it tender?”

“I’m going to let the doctor answer that question.”

“Am I really home? Is this a dream?”

“Not the last time I checked.” Randall planted his feet on the ground and Derek slipped out of bed. Randall caught him and did a slow pirouette and eased him into a wheel chair behind him. Had that always been there?

“While I was in a coma, I was on a planet of full intelligent bugs, the size of stingrays. I learned their language. One of them knew English. I was there just yesterday, can you imagine.” He tried to glance behind him, where Randall was pushing the chair. When the attendant came around the side to pull the door open, Derek looked up at him. But Randall did not look down.

“It was real, as real as this. Maybe more.”

“I suppose it would seem that way. You’ve been out of commission for a year, my man.” He brought his gaze down. “It’s hard to imagine what the mind would do with that.”

Derek was silenced. As he rolled down the hall, he mumbled: “It would play games with you.”

Dr. Warren let Randall go, and positioned Derek’s wheel chair in front of her massive oak desk herself. She came around behind it and smiled encouragingly. All the signs of a well-read and self-conscious doctor were there: diplomas, bookshelves full of medical dictionaries, drug manuals, journals, and textbooks. The expected controlled chaos on her desk. She was still smiling.

The window behind her fascinated Derek. Tree branches waved; a bird flew through in a blur. Somewhere outside a truck was accelerating, and its booming rat-a-tat came through the window.

“Derek,” she said. “I want to say how pleased I am at your recovery. It’s been quite a roller coaster, for both your family and your medical team. There were some negative voices. But I want you to know that your mother never gave up hope and I never did either. We knew in our hearts that this day would come.”

Derek said without thinking, “Thank you.”

“We’re just pleased,” she repeated. “Now, I would like to talk with you a bit about your therapy. There is a great deal to be done, but we have to take things slowly, methodically. We have quite an extensive plan – ” She lifted two sets of stapled sheets, covered by tables and lists, and looked at it before she completed the gesture to hand one copy to him.

“Dr. Warren,” Derek said, and then had to pause. “I need to know first what happened.” Another pause. “I don’t think I can feel settled here until I know.”

The doctor looked at him like a beneficent ruler confronted by a petition to step down. “All right,” she sighed. “You need to know.”

“Yes,” he said.

“Well, let’s see,” she said, shuffling folders to pull his up, then throwing it open and lifting a good hundred clipped sheets to get to near the bottom. “This states that you were committed to Salem Hospital in a suicidal state almost one year ago today, and that it was suspected you had overdosed on drugs, medications actually. That night, you slipped into a coma.” She let go of the stack. “The rest you know.”

Derek shook his head, confused. “I don’t remember that.”

“That is not surprising,” she replied blankly.

“I don’t remember being suicidal. Depressed. I didn’t take drugs.” The pause and his aching conclusion: “It doesn’t sound right.”

“It doesn’t sound right,” she repeated, with the rhythmic emphasis of a doctor to her committed patient.

“I think I may actually still be on bug planet.”

She put the therapy sheets aside in an acknowledgement of how this changed things. “All right, Derek. I have a question. I would like to know how you can be here and on this bug planet at the same time.”

“They gave me some kind of drug, and I think it is making me dream this.”

“All right,” she said. “Isn’t it also possible that this world is real and that your mind has made you dream the other world?”

“Yes, sure, that’s possible. It’s just that I remember getting the drug, and some things just don’t seem right here.”

“Sure,” she said. “I understand. You and I and your therapist will take some time to try to figure this out together. Will you keep an open mind? Can we agree that you will keep an open mind and talk with us about why one or the other world doesn’t seem real?”

“Yes, I promise,” he said, and smiled weakly. He really was getting tired.

Before the doctor could even call him, Randall was behind Derek and pulling his chair away. He took Derek out backwards into the hallway, and then switched into forward. In Derek’s weakened condition, the hallway before him seemed to extend into infinity. Randall picked up speed steadily as he pushed. “One thing,” he said to Derek as he leaned over his right ear, huffing: “Don’t forget where you’ll be happier. That counts for a lot.” He kept pushing faster, soon wildly, and Derek was about to shout for help when the walls became transparent like wet toilet paper. Derek recognized that he was in a bug tunnel, even though he did not have his visor on; it was as if his eyes were electric and illuminating the tunnel. The hospital hall gradually disappeared, as did the near-collapsing Randall. Derek was rushing toward some unknown destination, strapped in his hovercraft but directed by someone else, one of the bugs flowing with him through the silent dark.

Brett, you may remember, if you’ve gotten this far, that I started this so you could understand what happened to us. We’ve gotten way off topic with my story telling. I thought it would help you understand me – Lord knows, I’ve never talked about any of this with you. As it was, the stories were not much of a distraction for me. I was in a state of numbness, of incapacitation and anticipation, and there was nothing to get me out of my funk. I daydreamed; watched TV; thought of writing a screenplay about my life; puttered in the house and yard; shopped with the retired crowd and housewives; cleaned a little, and made evening meals.

You seemed unaffected. That may be the advantage of teenage malaise – you don’t get the “but for the grace of God” looks just because you come across distracted, self-occupied and indifferent. I wasn’t sure how you were doing inside, until one day you said you wanted to go to the beach with some friends,

to take advantage of a heat wave. Doreen was concerned and asked question after question. I was pleased that you were getting out of yourself – and maybe jealous, for both opportunity and attention.

“Mom,” you said, “I’m not shipping out with the merchant marines. It’s just a hundred miles away. Billy’s parents will be there the whole time; his dad’ll drive us, and his mom will come later.”

I could see Doreen making a mental note – okay, buddy, I’ve got names and I’ll be calling your references before you have a chance to do damage control.

I don’t know what you did the few days you were gone – I was still languishing when you got back, waiting for Kettle to call and say that Hayley had been located. Much too self-absorbed, I found myself imagining your trip mingled with my memories: I would imagine you into a scene and in a few seconds replace you, with a younger me as your stunt double. At other times, the present would morph into the past like dough kneaded upon itself.

Wrightsville Beach. Santa Monica Beach. Interstate 40, at two ends, more or less. On our end, the warmth of the winter sun has a cool tinge from the wind – not the overheated stuff the summer kicks up. You and your friends run headlong into the surf, overcoming the cold of the water, and wander out to where the waves first break. The energy of the waves rocks through you, and once in a while a sneaker comes in like a cold tackle from the back; you’re spitting salt water, clearing your eyes, shouting to each other.

Maybe you wander up or down the beach, padding through the soft sharp wet sand, and check out the bodies of those who train to show, protective if a girl friend is with you, otherwise just a bunch of young wolves on the prowl. The sky is pale blue but the sun still piercing bright. You can feel your body: tired, stressed, and doing just what it was designed to do. Pale skin, a belly just a little too big, not much muscle mass on the arms, it doesn’t matter. This is life, this is how your body is supposed to be. Your mind can wait.

There I am, in the sunset. We sit in the warm shadows of a bonfire. Near Santa Monica. Roasting hot dogs, eating a lot of sand in the process. We joke, can’t let the conversation end because it feels too awkward to sit in silence – too much like home? At the same time, the very definition of abandon, joy, and relaxation, all in the balance of a moment. You may already see the same thing in your own mind: looking back at a perfect, unconscious smile.

Then it’s Doreen and me walking late afternoon along the beach. We’re holding hands, as we did sometimes when we were first together. She looks younger, though a bit haggard, which could be her hard-living lifestyle or a certain anticipation of motherhood, I don’t know. I feel satisfied, I remember that: An attractive woman with me, who loves me and has promised to be with me forever. But there’s more. It’s the bodies again. I can feel how right it is to have a mate, a sexual mate, and it’s not just my mind, my conscious mind – it’s a nagging pressure and a half-finished mixture inside my head that says, you need this. And she is this. I look over at her, though I know her mind is elsewhere. Whatever else we have or don’t have, there is this.

Then it’s you, Brett. You are walking on the beach, while Frank and a couple other friends jog ahead and toss a Frisbee among them. I know you feel the same longing, and you often feel alone with it – maybe that you’ll always be alone with it. In that moment, I am struck, as with another crushing wave over the shoulders, at how hard it is to be young.

The voice came not only to Derek. There was a boy in a Californian suburb who lay still in his room, heard his heart beat and imagined the vague outlines of a creature that dragged its limbs forward with “oopfff – oopfff – oopfff – oopfff.” Nothing could stop its progress, unless he jumped out of his bed and ran to his parents’ room, talking into the crack in the doorway: “Mom (or dad), I hear a monster.” Or: “I can’t fall asleep.” Or: “There’s a noise.” Or: “Something’s scaring me.” One of them would emerge from the bedroom, try their best to shame this behavior out of the boy, take him back to his bed. Sometimes a kiss on the forehead would be enough to send him asleep. Sometimes he would wait with

resignation for his eyes to close, despite his anxious desire to keep them open. Other times he would imagine whole movies to get his mind off the fearful revelation of his heartbeat.

Once, in a sea of these miniature traumas, he was particularly unhappy with the sound thumping in his ears. There was no escape – either from the pounding or a weak ringing or creaking from who knows where. Just stop, he thought, please just stop. Then he realized there was a voice: “Hello.” It emerged from his own mind, but he thought he heard it, too. “Hello” – again. ‘That is too weird, I’m not even thinking that.’ He tried to imagine something – a great battle, or a series of unlikely acts strung together to save himself from an unbelievable army of assassins. The voice (infinitely weak, but his own) came in between, regardless. “Hello,” he heard himself say.

“Hello,” he thought.

“Use your mouth, please, it helps me to understand.”

He said: “I don’t like talking to myself.”

“You’re not talking to yourself. I am someone else, but you hear my voice in your head.”

“You aren’t real.” He really didn’t like this, and covered his head with his pillow.

“Are you afraid?”

Gut reaction: “No.” Then after reflection: “Yes.”

“I understand. Should I go away?”

The boy wanted to say yes, but even a few seconds of silence were enough to remind him: the pump engaging again and again, no different than the shuffling of a monster; the creaks somewhere; maybe daddy’s voice somewhere off in the distance.

“Should I?”

“No,” the boy said. “We can talk for a while.” He was already energizing his mind with the narrative he would spin out: spies, soldiers and great epic battles about winning and victory, without blood or explicit death.

“So,” said the voice. “Tell me something new.”

Okay, Brett, you were back at school, and I was home, and everything was as awkward as possible for us. Your mother and I had switched roles – she became absent and distracted and suspicious, throwing herself into her work and avoiding me, and I tried to engage you both in the family, to which I had retreated. This switch had done something even stranger for Doreen and me: we found ourselves arguing the other side of the equation. It did not tear down the wall between us, but we could see the wall now, much clearer than ever before. A strange feeling of déjà vu and told-you-so and oh-my-gosh and what-have-we-done, all together.

This new equilibrium was disequilibrated one afternoon when I got a phone call. Brook, the caller id announced.

“Hello?” I said with careful distance in my voice.

“Hi, John,” replied Barbara, relieved, I think, that Doreen had not answered.

“Barbara.”

“You’re wondering why I would call.”

“Yes,” I said simply.

“I’ve got Brett here,” she said.

I didn’t think anything could surprise me – I was wrong. There was no threat there, but the meaning wasn’t clear, either.

“I called and spoke with him a couple days ago – I was concerned about you, and I knew you wouldn’t want to talk to me – probably couldn’t, either. We got to talking, and I’m afraid he misunderstood our conversation. He hitchhiked out here today.”

I sat contemplating this twist for a few seconds. The least suspicious thing now would be just to go get him, even if there were a hundred ways to misconstrue the situation.

“I’ll be there in half an hour.”

“Thanks, John, we can talk when you get here.” She hung up the phone.

I wanted to call Barry up and curse him out and then ask him what I should do. I was afraid to call Kettle and hear that this whole conversation was another nail in my self-measured casket. Doreen was, of course, out of the question. I got my car keys and headed to the car. The drive was difficult for me: just the few days of enforced domesticity had reduced me to near agoraphobia. Plus I found my mind wandering in several ways: maybe jealous again of you and your spontaneity, despite the hitchhiking; wondering how I would explain this to Doreen; hoping that Barbara meant it when she said we could talk; wondering if this was another setup by the police; and wishing the whole mess would just go away and leave me to my lethargy.

I pulled up into Barbara’s driveway, and there was a car I didn’t recognize. A client, I assumed – and felt irritated. I rang the doorbell, and you answered. You moved back into the darkness of the house without a word or without opening the screen door. I followed.

You had sat down in the little reading room I’d left Barry in. You picked up a book on tantricism. I didn’t bother to sit: “Hi Brett. Shall we go?”

You looked annoyed by the question, squirmed a bit, and said: “Barbara says we should stay until she’s done. She wants to talk to you and she said she would profile my aura, if you say it’s okay.” You looked at me finally. “It’s free.”

That hurt, but it was on target – I was about to say, “I’m not paying a penny....”

“Maybe,” I said, torn between not wanting you to experience that with her and anticipating that you would say something like, “If it’s good enough for you...”

“How long will she be?” I asked as I sat on the front edge of the chair facing his.

You shrugged.

“What are you reading?”

“Philosophy,” you said and put the book back into its place on the bookshelf – so I wouldn’t be able to grab it, I guess.

“What do you think of the psychenergy philosophy?”

“What do you think, dad?” you said, a bit angry that I was pushing you on this.

I moved back a bit on the chair. “I don’t actually believe it at all. But I have to admit that there is something attractive –” I had to laugh – “besides Barbara.”

You laughed, too, for a moment. “Right,” you said. Then: “I’m not here because of her.”

“What brought you out here?”

“I want to know for myself – I guess.”

“You want to know if she can channel the bog monster?”

You brushed your hair back and shook your head, a gesture I’d seen you make with your friends but never with me.

“It’s not that, so much. I know the bog monster is crap. It’s whether there’s anything out there at all.”

“What - like God?”

You shook your head in the negative. “Not even close to that far. But is there something that communicates after death? Something that holds us together?”

“Like the Force?”

“Again,” you said, “crap. I’m talking about the slightest hope for us, dad, the slightest bit of hope that we’re not random blips on a cosmic radar.”

“Now that’s philosophy,” I said.

“My teacher calls it Sartre-sur-le-tête. Instead of saying there is no exit from this meaninglessness, you keep looking for one.”

“Who’s your teacher?” I was growing ever more amazed at this exchange, and was almost relieved that there was someone else’s voice behind it.

“Mr. Bouveau.”

“French teacher?”

You nodded. We sat in silence for a minute. It was my turn.

“I’d like to believe there is a God.”

“A Sunday-morning God with fatuous admonitions, or a real all-powerful being who makes decisions about whether you live or die?”

“I’d like to think it’s a God who beams with pride and feels sorrow with the rest of us.” That wasn’t exactly how I see it, but I wanted to be as positive as I could, given your pessimism.

“A God who hides behind physics and makes himself known through fairy tales?”

That cynicism was disturbing to me. “Yes,” I said. I wasn’t going to beleaguer you with “unknowable ways” and vague arguments about free will, but I also didn’t want to leave you without pointing a way back to the rest of us. “If there is a God – and I think there is – he has to understand our skepticism. There has to be many ways to him. Or her.” Requisite pause. “Maybe doing physics isn’t that different from prayer.”

I knew that was a ridiculous thing to say, and your face communicated it. We were silent until Barbara and her client came into the room. He was a well-dressed, well-coifed gentleman, someone whose every feature said, “Did I mention that I’m successful.” He was visibly disturbed to see the likes of us huddled in the waiting area, but recovered and engaged Barbara for a couple minutes on the minutia of Pittsboro politics before an alarm rang on his phone and he pretended that he was too busy now, suddenly, to pay attention to whether she moved on to her next customers. The best solution for him was the actual one: she held up a single finger as a wait gesture to us, and then disappeared into her chambers. Her client produced his money clip and stripped out a couple large bills and put them into the donation box. Well, I thought, he wants no record. And he was gone.

When Barbara came back, she was carrying a clipboard and pen. “Brett,” she said with a voice between clergy and camp counselor, “I would like you to copy these statements. Copy each one onto the bottom of the page on which you find it.” She smiled, but did not yet hand the clipboard to you. You were disappointed, but also confused by this, and just looked up at her.

“I’m sorry, Brett. I don’t normally do auras for teenagers. They are not as telling with younger people. I find handwriting to be the most revealing psychic source.” She looked at me and smiled for my indulgence; then said to the both of us: “Teen auras seem all to look alike, no matter what their psychic state. But teen handwriting is perfectly telling: they have all learned how to write according to a uniform pattern and they have each altered that pattern to fit their own essence. If they are copying something that allows their subconscious minds to engage, their essence comes right through their handwriting. – Better than palms.” She flashed me a peculiar smile.

You were unconvinced, but when she handed you the clipboard you started reading it. I think it activated the rote student in you. Barbara did the one-finger invitation, which was less fetching now, but I followed her anyway, through the converted TV room into the reading room. She gestured more conventionally for me to sit across the small table from her.

“Thank you for coming,” she said and paused for me to jump into the conversation.

“I came for Brett,” I reminded her, not too meanly, I thought.

“I was very surprised when he rang our doorbell, and I felt bad for having precipitated this, for whatever reason.” She tried to smile apologetically, but there was something about the smile that said, I’m doing this because I know you are too conventional to understand why none of this is my fault. She continued: “You probably have lots of reasons for being upset with me. I imagine Barry Moore has had a lot to say about me –”

“I haven’t talked to him since we drove out here together. He never contacted me before that article, and I haven’t spoken to him since.”

“I see,” she said, looking down at the table. “I’m sorry to hear that. I think he was good for you, as troubled as his soul is.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Maybe because his soul is so confused. It gives you a chance to recognize the importance of your own.”

“I’m not sure I get that logic.”

“Be careful, John. Logic can be a powerful way to dismiss what is troubling you. If you can’t feel it here –” she laid her hand on her heart, somewhere above the bosom, “then what good is it?”

“I had a discussion on this topic with Samantha Ogg, from the other perspective. Her point is that no matter how something feels there, physics decides what’s going to happen. She’d say we should get used to deferring to our brain cells.”

“We already do that enough. You can be as logical as a machine, you still won’t know the first thing about being happy in this world, in this universe. – Ockham’s razor was meant to free us from dogma, not reinforce it. Why should the best explanation always be the one that explains the least about our existence?”

I shrugged or at least my face had the look, I’m sure.

Her mood changed instantly. She shook her head, as if clearing cobwebs. “I don’t mind skepticism, John. It makes everything clearer for me.”

“I recall your saying that before.”

She took just a moment to continue. “I get energy from it. There is something very difficult about dealing with one’s own or others’ inner life. When I deal with skeptics, I can point out the most basic things to them and they’re amazed.”

I had to smirk.

Derek was weak and slept until they reached their endpoint, which was an uncharacteristically wide dead-end. The hatch that opened and let them all in at once – all five bugs in their party – was equally outsized. After a short while, Derek realized why. They had reached a portal to the surface. A giant cloud projector showed what was going on topside: a windswept surface with only boulders and some bug instruments visible, and a sandstorm blowing by at hurricane force. The sky was gray-orange, but there was no sun visible from this perspective. The foul weather would explain why they were alone here.

The image on the projector changed, and Thunk appeared. English text appeared below him, which read like a jumble, but meant the following:

“Earthling, you ingested a substance that we bugs use to relax, though our alien guests often have a stronger reaction to its properties. The substance contains a mold that has evolved to make its victim immobile, though we bugs are mostly immune. The goal of the mold is to increase mental activity, generating electricity that it uses for its own metabolism. The combination of effects frequently makes our guests dream. The creature that you saw in our receiving room has been living in a mold-induced dream world for much of the last fifty bug years. The same opportunity is available to you. Most guests can return to their own lives in their dream world and live out a normal life. We offer this to you as compensation for the protocol that stole you from your world and your own life, for the illegitimate desire on our planet to see and study intelligent creatures, as if they were no more than zoo animals.

“We know that your mentor has given you a view of our society as an oppressive social order. Let me reply. She represents an extreme minority opinion. She wants to lead a revolution, yet she lives in a world where freedom and justice already dwell. Revolution has no place here, but her own dreams of glory cannot let her see that. She has told you that this world lacks meaning and initiative, but what she

means is that her own life is empty of meaning, and her hopes and dreams ill focused and self-serving. She wants change for the sake of change, and she looks to your little world for an example of a world in constant change. She chooses to overlook the killing, the brutality and the indifference. She sees only what she wants to see. She is a zealot.

“I know that you have grown attached to her, but you must decide what your life will be. We can give you any kind of life that you desire. We can give you freedom, too, the freedom that she has denied you. It starts here today. You may visit the surface. We have brought equipment that will protect you, if you choose to go out. The surface is particularly unpleasant today, but it varies only a little from this. Sometimes the sand moves half as fast, and one can explore more. But you may do what you choose.”

The giant keyboard showed up at the bottom of the projector, but Derek didn't move. ‘Outside going me,’ he tried to say in Bug. After Thunk said something to his companions, one of them produced a package from his back depression. Derek opened it and found a full bodysuit that reminded him of a comic book costume. He pulled the suit on over his exoskeleton, removed his own visor and zipped up the facemask. The eye covers had the same displays as his visor. He found himself breathing normally; air processing was occurring somewhere. He settled on his hover-scooter. The giant fuzzy screen dissipated, revealing a chamber beyond, and Derek moved into it. A heavy door shut behind him. They won't – they can't – leave me outside, he repeated to himself. The room slowly became hotter and he began to feel bursts of wind from somewhere. Finally the lower right portion of the chamber parted from the rest, exposing the bug world surface to his right. That side of the chamber opened completely. The wind was howling from the left, but he was still mostly protected from it.

He realized that if he ventured out into this mess on his hovercraft he would be lost. He dismounted. They could have told me – but he understood that would have been contrary to their purpose. He considered exiting upright, but even with the exoskeleton's strength it seemed wiser to fall to all fours. He crawled to the edge of the chamber. His ears were completely protected by the suit – the howling was coming from speakers covering each ear – but the volume and type of sound was still disturbing. In slow motion he exposed half his head beyond the end of the chamber. It was buffeted by a thousand passing hands, but he did not withdraw it.

He moved more of his body out and galloping dogs attacked. He let his body fall to the ground and crawled further out into the melee. His new position protected him better than before, and no creature was making much of a dent in his suit, so he inched fully out of the chamber. The sun was still not visible until he turned on his back and saw it glowing weakly when the clouds thinned. It was at least three times as large as Sol, something that unnerved him. He had imagined this moments many times: the most common scenario was that the storm imagery would dissolve into an earth view – maybe a beach – do they wheel the comatose to such places? – and he would be home. What dementia could withstand the proximity of the sun?

But there was no revelation to be won here. The only possible outcome was defeat, buried in the shifting dirt of an alien world. He watched the gusts of sand and grit cross his viewport with fascination, as if contemplating a bonfire. The insanity of his life seemed embodied in the buffeting storm. He could rip off his suit. He could force himself to his feet and run and maybe fly as far as he could; finding his way back would be impossible. These were solutions to the problem he saw flowing over him, each more attractive in its own way than the inevitable crawl back to the portal, and the return to the underground existence of a cowering bug.

His companions left him at his home, with a handful of the pills that looked like dung balls. Thunk hadn't tried to convince him of anything after his outside experience, but the pills were an obvious reminder of their offer. Just pop and forget everything. After he sat for a while, expecting a contact from someone, he went to his projector and started watching a sitcom. A shift in the program brought up a

movie about Joan of Arc. The point was not lost on him, though he suspected they misunderstood the human response to her drama.

He turned off the projector. Hoping for a distraction, he tried to call up the voice in his head, but there was no response. Given what he understood about his conversation partner, this had to be as much about petulance or disinterest as anything, since the voice could be from any time in the future, a time-shifting recorder in reverse.

A couple listless hours later, he looked at the dung ball. One wouldn't hurt, he thought. Something to do, something to transition from the excitement of the last couple days. He split the pill into halves and popped one in his mouth. It was brittle and melted in his mouth like a confection, but tasted more like a pile of ash. He wiped his lips and even his tongue in an effort to get the taste out. Then he waited. After a number of minutes, his limbs started to get heavy, and his eyelids closed for a brief moment: he saw bits and pieces of the hospital he had left behind. He opened his eyes, and he was back in his chamber.

He closed his eyes again and went back to the hospital; it resolved into a detailed vision in great passing waves. During those first few moments, he tried his best to evaluate the realism, the detail, the plausibility. He was in a large room, the kind made famous in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. There were faces, but none he could recognize. They were doing a variety of things – puzzles, some kind of arts and crafts, reading, staring at the TV blaring in the corner. Blaring? He heard nothing, but he knew it was loud. His body, which he could not feel, was folded into a wheelchair, covered in pajamas and a robe. His head was held in place by a brace; his arms were bound.

"Hello," he could hear himself say, and slowly the television came up to volume, and the noise of twenty variously occupied humans washed across his ears, a mix of sounds that seemed like music to him.

No one paid any attention, so he said again, "Hello!"

An inquisitive face came across his field of vision, and was startled. The tall black woman with a full wig of bouncy curls moved her body around the wheel chair to get a good look at him. "Well, I'll be," she said. "Did you say that?"

"Yes," Derek said.

"Are you back with us, child?" she asked him as if confirming a confession from a troublemaking boy.

"I think so," he replied weakly.

"The doctor isn't going to believe this," she said, her arms folded, lips pursed, her head moving back and forth ever so slightly.

Derek was wheeled back from meeting with Dr. Warren and his mother, and found himself in a strange office. Behind the desk was a short heavysset and balding man, with the distinctive collar from one of the highly organized churches. When Derek looked around there was no attendant to wheel him out. He tried to do it himself but the brake was set and he didn't see how to unset it.

The man bestowed a wide friendly smile on him.

"Our miracle child," he said.

"No miracles here," Derek answered.

"God intervenes in ways we least anticipate, my son. – I understand that you are having problems distinguishing reality from your condition."

"That's safe to say."

"I can only imagine what that must be like."

"It's not pleasant."

"Shall we agree to talk about more pleasant things?"

“What? Fishing? I don’t fish.” He didn’t want to continue, but did: “And I don’t read any more. I can’t stand watching television. I don’t go out with my friends. I don’t philosophize. And I don’t read the bible.”

“I see,” said the pastor with all smile muscles now lax.

“Can I go? I think I’d rather be in the common room.”

“Is that more real than I am for you?” The pastor stared at him.

Derek relented. “No,” he said. “I’m sorry. It’s just very hard. I’m still not convinced about any of this.”

His opposite nodded. “It’s incredibly hard, I understand. I can’t help you with the pain you’ve experienced. But maybe I can help with the doubt. There is a reason, you know, that Dr. Warren had you come to me.” He stopped talking, stood with some difficulty, and walked around the desk to the chair next to Derek’s (had that always been there?). “Doubt is, so to speak, the stock and trade of the clergy.” A brief smile, and a pause.

“You mean, you feel doubt, too?” asked Derek.

“Well, yes,” he said, “but that’s not the point. I feel doubt; we all feel doubt; but I’ve got every reason and every influence to overcome my doubt. The question is, what does the young man who has been snatched from everything he once knew, who has suffered unbelievably, what does that young man feel? Doubt is inevitable. But what comes next?”

“I am on my own,” Derek replied to his face, matter-of-factly, bleakly, eyelids moistening.

“Sure,” said the pastor, with a hand extended partway to his knee. “You are on your own. But let’s see if there is a way back. You’ve met with your mother a couple times now?”

“Yes.”

“Did she seem real?”

“Very,” he said, then thought for a while. “But she’s probably the most vivid memory I have. She would seem real.”

“All right. Did she comfort you?”

“Yes,” he said. He could feel the heave of a great sob waiting to reach the surface.

“Good. I’m pleased. So – whether she’s real or not – she provided comfort? Meaning you’re not alone, right?” He gave a quick sophist smirk.

“As in – it doesn’t matter whether God exists, we’d have to create him. I don’t buy it.”

The pastor shook his head, his brow knitted. “Don’t misunderstand me, Derek. I’m not here to feed you chalky platitudes.” Then: “Let’s look at the God question, since you brought it up. The atheists and scientific agnostics have demonstrated that God does not manifest himself to scientific inquiry. With that, they say, God is dead. According to them, evolution provides all the explanatory power we need for understanding who we are and our needs. Even the *idea* of God can be seen as a natural adaptation of some kind. Right?” Derek just looked back. “But let’s look at this question, or, rather, let’s look at how it is framed. Your evolutionist will reject God, or say God belongs in a box, with no impact on our lives. But let’s interrogate that evolutionist. Will you assume the role?”

Derek looked skeptical, but didn’t say or indicate no.

“All right, Mr. Evolutionist, let me ask you about your mother. Do you love her? Does she provide comfort? Do you get a sense of meaning from your family?”

“Yes,” said Derek, reluctantly.

“And yet – don’t you know that her love for you, and yours for her, is evolutionarily pre-programmed? You’re just carrying out the roles assigned to you by evolution. How can that be meaningful?”

“It just is,” said Derek. “And we’re not just doing what evolution tells us. We have a bond from our common experiences, our life together.”

“Sure,” said the pastor. “I understand. The key question is this: why can that not be true for a relationship with God?”

“Oh, I don’t know. My mom is real; God is a figment.”

“Okay, Derek, I’ll let that answer go, though in a debate you might find that to be a more difficult position to stake out than you think. All right, God is a figment. Let’s back up a half step. Could you not also say that your mother is a figment? Let me explain. Your mother is a biologically determined organism that seems to care for you because care is a behavior that has been selected for within the mammal family over a hundred million years. You believe it is individual interest, but she is driven to this relationship, as are you...”

“But she is still real.”

“Okay, as biological mother she is real. And you can rely to a degree on her maternal judgment, which is in itself comfort. But the comfort you feel from her as your mother – that is your choice as an individual. If you were being ‘scientific,’ you would have to reject your relationship as the meaningless instinctual interaction between two mere animals, no different than between a lab rat mother and a lab rat baby.”

“Science is not about destroying the social fabric, you’re just making that up.”

“True, Derek.” He relaxed in his chair, after Derek had made this connection for him. “Science is not about making us cold machines. It *has* been about making us godless creatures, who are forced to find meaning only in the family and in fleeting social organizations. Don’t get me wrong. I have no disagreement with science as a means for improving our lot on earth. But I reject the application of the scientific method to sources of hope and comfort and meaning. These are always elective and local and specific. They cannot be found in replicable experiments.”

Derek looked down at his hands, reflecting whether the pastor had not just made an unjustified triple leap.

“Do you know about the placebo effect, Derek?”

“Sure, sugar pills.”

“The power of belief. It’s measurable. There’s plenty of room for this in science, by the way. New drugs have to improve more than one-third of the cases in order just to beat this effect.”

“So – people expect something and they experience it. That’s not a proof of God.”

“Right. But it is a proof of the power of belief. Is it wrong to believe? To find comfort? Is God somehow an illegal recourse? Sure, I can’t prove his existence to you. If I showed the biology of mammals to an alien, I couldn’t prove that a mother-child relationship is anything more than hormones and instinct. I ask you to choose to believe, Derek. The experience is real. The comfort is real. Your life is real. That is all we can know, and all we need to know.”

Brett, you and I drove back more or less in silence. You were upset with the whole experience, and knew there would be consequences. I would have liked to ease your anxiety, but Doreen would have something to say about this, and she was not likely to see it as I did. I was feeling that you had learned from it – from the anticipation and the journey and the disappointment – and that punishment from us would only distract from that equation. But Doreen had made none of this voyage. For her, it would only be a dangerous trip to an older woman who had called to speak with you, and for all she knew, had lured you out there. Or perhaps she, too, would know that the target was me.

After Barbara and I had clarified what she knew about your motivation, we sat silent for a few moments. I was reminded of the last time, and wanted to break that spell.

I said: “So, have you heard from the bog monster lately?”

Somewhat coldly: “Have you?”

“I have not.”

“Had any dreams lately?”

“Not that I remember.”

“I recommend,” she said, “that you consider writing down your dreams. You may find something that has been troubling you.”

“I haven’t been troubled, other than by the police.”

“Really. Well then. How’s Doreen?”

I was immediately suspicious. “She’s fine,” I said and tried to find in her eyes what she meant by that.

She gave me a hint of a smile, as if to say I didn’t mean anything. But there was something else as well.

“You may want to share your dreams with Doreen.”

“Really?” I said. “Why is that?”

She looked away, acting a bit insulted by that question, then said: “She *is* your wife, John.”

I didn’t dignify that, and thought about whether she would share everything with her husband, such as he was, but that needling comment seemed a bit too hard. I tried to deflect. “Yes, she is. Can I ask what Jerry thinks about my case these days? He seemed pretty concerned when we were here.”

“He hasn’t said anything about it.”

That seemed unlikely, except for two circumstances: they didn’t talk shop – very possible, considering their different approaches – or he had just been throwing that stuff at me and it really didn’t matter to him. Well, fine, I thought.

Neither of us followed up, and the conversation essentially ended. I asked, how are your girls, etc. I was feeling very uncomfortable by the time you came into the room and looked at us. “I’m done,” you said with finality.

As I said, we drove home in silence. Doreen didn’t seem surprised when we both showed up. I waved to her that she should come with me into the living room, while you headed right to your room. I explained with the least possible drama and concern what had happened, and waited for the explosion. But all Doreen said was: “All right.” The brevity could mean a number of things, most with unpleasant consequences, so I held us together for another moment. “I thought we should agree on a punishment.”

Doreen said, “I got the impression you thought Brett was punished enough.”

“Yes,” I said, “I guess so. So we’re in agreement?”

“I’ll defer,” she said. She smiled a provisional, tired smile.

“You don’t normally defer,” I said.

“John, I wouldn’t defer when you hardly spent any time with your son and would come with your off-the-wall opinions. I don’t know the situation and have to see it through your eyes. With that perspective, sure, I defer.”

“What would you do? I mean, if you were in my shoes.”

“Is this really necessary?”

“No, not necessary, but I am curious.”

“I would ground him for two weeks and take this opportunity to have him see a professional.”

I was dumbfounded. “Wow. We can still do that, if you want.”

Doreen chuckled. “I didn’t tell you that to make you do it. And I’m not sure that my instinct is the right one here. Sometimes, I think less concern and more compassion works better with Brett.”

“Okay,” I said. I wasn’t sure if I should be proud or feel outsmarted. We waited for a few seconds to see if the conversation could continue. “Hey, do you remember your dreams?”

“What?” Doreen asked.

“I was wondering if you remember your dreams.”

“Can I ask why you ask?”

“Barbara Hohenstauffen said that I should try to see if I can remember my dreams, which I don’t. She also said that I should tell my dreams to you.”

“Real-ly!” Doreen raised her voice with disbelief – or maybe it was small case of territorial anger.

She went on in a different register: “I only remember dreams occasionally. Usually they’re anxiety dreams when I remember them, and they involve Brett. I’ve got to find him, or we’re together and I’ve got help us escape something.”

“I’m not in them?”

“Usually not,” she said. Not apologetically, but softly.

“I don’t remember mine at all.”

“Then I think you should try to remember them.”

“I’ll need to set an alarm to wake myself up.”

“That’s fine,” she said. “If I wake up, you can tell them to me.” Then she smiled.

When I saw “Kettle” in the caller id, I was ready to declare victory. “Hello?” I said.

“Hi John, it’s William Kettle.”

“Hi, good to hear from you. Any news?”

“Well, not exactly. I’ll tell you where that stands. But first. We received a subpoena.”

“A subpoena – why?”

“The sheriff’s department would like a DNA sample.”

“Why did they subpoena, and why do you have it – I would have given them a sample.”

“It’s always best to make sure you know why they want one.”

“You told them I wouldn’t give them one?”

“I told them we wanted a judge to say this wasn’t just a fishing trip...”

“I guess one did...”

“Don’t worry about that. A subpoena says, we want to fish in this fishing hole. It doesn’t say anything more than that.”

“What are they fishing for?”

“Jane Doe #7. I think they mentioned that case to you. There’s nothing there, so you don’t need to worry about this. Do you?”

“What?”

“There’s no reason we need to worry, is there?”

“None,” I said as firmly as I could. “So – what is up with Hayley?”

“All right. We don’t have her. But we are on her trail, and we know exactly what the police know. She and her beau are in or around Santa Fe. We think that her companion has some distant relatives there, although it’s unclear where they live or what their names are. His mother is useless in this regard; they must be on his father’s side, or maybe she’s afraid to let her son get caught.”

“Is this good news?”

“Here’s the really interesting news. We’ve been given to understand that Hayley is negotiating a return through her family’s attorney. Her conditions are that she wants to marry her boyfriend and that she wants him protected from any charges. She is threatening to cross over to Mexico otherwise.”

“That seems like it should fly. Or won’t it?”

“I don’t know. I assume her parents just want her back, but a desire for revenge against this boy is not beyond belief.”

“Hmmm,” I said, realizing something. “Won’t this be pyrrhic victory? I mean, if they arrange her return, they’ll announce it and we’ve got nothing.”

“Maybe,” he said. “We could beat them to the punch, if my sources hold out. The police knew all along, etc.”

“But we could look like opportunists. How does that play in the court of public opinion?”

“It varies,” he said, somewhat down at where this was going.

“So how am I going to get them off my back?”

“Well, the DNA test is good news, actually. Give it a number of weeks, they get something back with no match, and already their surprise suspect is looking less like a coup. That should do it. The test is a good thing.”

“I guess so,” I said.

“Isn’t it?” he said, with that sudden edge, probing if I had something to tell my counsel. I answered as best I could to relieve his nagging doubt.

We hung up shortly thereafter. I would go to the police station the next morning, and give a DNA sample to a crime scene technician from the sheriff’s department.

I made a more sumptuous meal than the usual spaghetti and garlic bread – I think it was New York prime and baked potatoes – and Doreen and I shared a glass of red wine. After you had dispersed, she waited to hear what was up. DNA, I said. We went through the usual stuff. She disappeared to look up this Jane Doe if she could.

Did your mother have suspicions about me, too? I don’t think so. I think she was doing due diligence – making sure so that there would be no unintended doubt in her voice. But I really didn’t know for sure, and I don’t know what she found out.

I was used to staying up rather late, but this evening I didn’t want to get on the Internet or read or write or even watch TV. Before going to bed, I resolved to set the alarm. Doreen gave me a look – the timing wasn’t very good for her – but she only said, “I look forward to it.” I lay in bed for a fairly long time before sleep took over; Doreen was still up.

When an alarm rings at an unaccustomed time, there is a sorting period. Your mind registers the sound and may figure out that it has relevance, but sometimes it isn’t quite ready to throw the switch to drag itself out of recumbence. And even after your mind starts to light up, the body remains inert. Without the response of your body, place seems irrelevant, as does time; you are ethereal for a moment.

I knew I had been dreaming – I could still see the dream as if in it, not yet as a remembered but empty husk. I was walking away, but looked over my shoulder at the tableau. He was there, the bog monster from the séance, slowly approaching a group of quaint country denizens. I recognized the garb as colonial. The bog monster was accepting an offering of some stretched-out rabbits and a raccoon. It felt like this was a ritual that the Native Americans had carried out for centuries. Live and let live. Perhaps the monster provided a form of protection: guidance for the lost, protection against roaming predators, shaman-like medicinals. Or maybe they just crossed paths occasionally, always warily honoring each other, lest there be a fateful misunderstanding.

I woke up, aware of the import of the dream but barely able to hold onto it. Into the darkness I said: “Doreen? Doreen?”

“John?”

“I dreamt about the bog monster. They have been here for centuries, and have lived in peace with the residents. I don’t know what he did in return, but he accepted gifts from the Indians and then the settlers.”

I could hear Doreen rolled over. “What?”

I repeated myself.

“That’s a nice dream. What do you think it means?”

I was surprised. “It means what I said. Now we have some history.”

“John,” she said, “the bog monster doesn’t exist and that was all just a dream. There’s no history there.”

“Right,” I said, realizing the import of what she said. Every emotion – even my excitement – had been part of the dream? Wow, I thought. “It seemed real,” I said.

“I know,” she said and was soon snoring lightly.

I tried to make sense of it. I found my mind wandering back to Dally Moore. Could she have been saved by the bog monster, if subscriber had only understood? Sure, the bog monster did not exist. But if? Two degrees of “if” and she might have been saved. Two degrees.

I was floating back into the dream realm, where I was sure: there was so much more about this creature, but I would never remember a bit of it.

Horvath met me at the reception desk, and we walked back to their interview room. A different woman was there – I had expected the sheriff’s deputy from before, naively. This woman reminded me of my colleague Carol, Ms. Don’t-Get-Me-Started. Or maybe she was just the archetypal young grandmother. In either case, she seemed like someone you just automatically knew. She actually said: “Okay, honey, open up.” She swabbed both sides inside my mouth and then covered up the swab. “All done, hon.” She smiled at Horvath – a look that spoke volumes about how people greet and treat each other with respect in her world. She didn’t look at me again.

Horvath looked like he wanted to talk but seemed inhibited by Kettle’s intentional absence: ‘We’ll talk to you when we are good and ready.’

I headed out into the parking lot, and realized I didn’t want to go home, now that I made it out of the house. I knew where I would go and why. I drove and parked, peeked into Carolina Brewery and then walked to the nearby coffee joint, 3Cups. Nothing. I knew it was early. I went back to the brewery, ate lunch, and then went to the café again. I sat there for about an hour – I was ready to leave in fact – when he walked by. I got up and followed.

He was in a hurry, walking with a nervous step, his hands jammed into his front pockets and some folders under one arm.

“Barry!” I shouted. I had to shout twice more, each time louder, before he stopped, reflected and then turned. He looked at me very carefully, I assume checking for a half concealed weapon.

“Hi Barry,” I said as I neared, trying to sound approachable but not inappropriately friendly.

“Hello John.” He had blanked his face in anticipation of anything.

“I was just having a coffee,” I said. “Would you like to join me? – I know, we both know, there’s a pretty serious matter between us, but I really would like your opinion on something.” When he didn’t reply I tried this: “I dreamt last night about the bog monster, and I was wondering what you think about the dream.”

That smelled of a trap for him. “I’m sorry I’ve got to be somewhere. Someone’s expecting me.”

I tried to deflect. “Did you hear that I was out at Barbara’s recently?”

“I did,” he said as if he thought I would be surprised. “Your son has a bit of an infatuation.”

“Maybe, but I think Brett is more confused than anything. His French teacher is an existentialist of sorts, and Brett was acting out his teacher’s desperation for intellectual comfort.”

“Or maybe he’s a desperate intellectual himself.”

“I guess so. I’ll let you go. But maybe we could talk about my dream sometime. It seemed very real.”

He reflected on the opportunity this represented, and decided on a third course. “I’ve got a few minutes. Tell me now.”

“All right,” I said, a bit disappointed. I related the dream and after.

“Unlikely,” he said with a dismissive face. “Regularized contact would be suicidal. Consider the Neanderthals. They disappear from the fossil record simultaneous with the rise of Homo sapiens sapiens, with just a trace in our genome. That was not a happy sharing of resources, like some prehistoric Thanksgiving. And even if you think about that holiday, you know how it turned out for the native peoples of the Americas.”

I felt some consternation, but I was after something else as well. “Why does Barbara think I should be talking to you?”

“How am I to know that,” he said with an evasive tone.

“What do you know that I don’t?”

Now it was his turn to be irritated. “Nothing.” After a pause: “Maybe because I’ve had some visits by Duke officials trying to convince me to drop my book project.”

“Really? Why?”

“They seem to think that my theory about the monster in Duke forest, which I’ve been sharing in some public readings, negatively impacts their mission of research and education.”

“And what do you think?”

“I think,” he said, with a sidelong glance at someone strutting down the sidewalk on the other side of the street, “they are concerned that someone on the outside knows. But more importantly, they are desperate to find out who my source is.”

“And who is it?” I asked with a foreboding.

He smirked and moved a half step closer, looking intently at me. “I am sorry. You were convenient. – But you will not be forsaken. I’m working on all this. Barbara may believe that things are farther along than they are. In the meantime, I doubt they’ll be bothering you, but if they do, just say you saw something unusual on a satellite image, once, but the image was replaced and you haven’t seen anything since. The rest would be my elaboration. That should satisfy them.”

I asked once more: “Do you think there could be any connection at all between my dream and your creature?”

His expression changed, as if he realized he’d been cavorting with the enemy. “Really, the only connection is you.” He marched off, moving back into the purposive gait of someone for whom each step brings him imperceptibly but inexorably closer to his destiny.

That afternoon, I got a call from work. I was being taken off paid status, as a suspect in a felony case. Proceedings were underway against my continued employment with the county. “I’m sorry, John.” What, I’m not sorry? I’m not disappointed beyond words? Not angry? “Thanks,” I said. We both hung up immediately after that, or at least I thought it was simultaneous.

I left a message for Kettle with his secretary, on the assumption he’d be able to find me a labor lawyer to fight this battle. I didn’t know where to go from there. More disappointment and angst with Doreen. More uncertainty in talking with you. More daydreaming. More anxiety about writing my memoir or Derek’s story or the screenplay to a modern *Crucible*. I sat down, decided to move sideways on all this, and started to write something else.

The boy who heard the voice would create a tent under his sheet and say into the overheated air, “I’m ready.”

The voice would come, sometimes sounding different, sometimes unsure where it had left the story. “Help me. Where did we leave off?” The boy would try to retell the last part of the story, and the voice would inevitably have to back things up, because the boy could hardly retain the full scope of the story. Below is a composite version from many nights, minus the lapses, backtracks and the boy’s interludes.

“I am the watcher,” said the voice. “I have spent an eon watching, and it is finally at an end. But all in its due course. First, I want to put you in my place. I believe I am somewhat younger than you, or rather, than you would be if you were here with me. I can’t say for sure if you were alive when I was born, or how long we were on earth together. There were many changes in your time, many changes in medicine and biology and computing and nanotechnologies. Some benefited, some did not.

“I was a graduate of a very good university, a physicist of some promise. My specialty was subatomic physics. We used an atom smasher to try to figure out details about the smallest particles of the universe. On the day we made the discovery, our task was relatively simple. A theoretician asked us to examine something that he had found in the formulas he was working on. He had brought together

two distinct parts of physics: quantum mechanics, the theory that describes how the tiniest particles in the universe interact, and thermodynamics, the description of how energy moves on larger scales. He had been piqued by looking at some thought experiments from each of these fields.

“He started with a thought experiment called Maxwell’s Daemon. Maxwell was thinking about the logic of the second law of thermodynamics. This physical law says that things tend to fall apart, not together. Maxwell found his example in how heat spreads. A fire is hotter closer and cooler farther away; when the fire burns down it is not long before the ashes and embers are cool to the touch. Maxwell asked, okay, can we imagine some way in which things would not happen this way? He described two chambers with moving particles and a door between them; let’s say that one chamber is warmer and the other cooler, and that the door is open. The particles are like bouncing balls that never stop. Over time, the cooler balls in the cooler side will bounce into the warmer side, and vice versa. Everything gets mixed up. That seems obvious. But can we imagine it not happening that way? Maxwell said: let’s bring in a daemon, a pretend creature who is small enough and strong enough to control the door. He watches the balls and lets the warmer balls – the faster ones – into the originally warm side and deflects the cooler, slower ones. Over time, the warmer side regains its warmth. The daemon can overcome the second law. But he is the exception that proves the rule.

“Does this make sense to you?”

“Does the daemon fly?”

“I suppose he does. But he’s not real.”

“If he’s not real, what good does he do for Mr. Maxwell?”

“Well put. Our friend had the same question. Is there anything real in the universe like our daemon, who might want to do Mr. Maxwell’s work?”

“Is there?”

“As it turns out, yes. But first we have to look at the other part of the problem we had, the quantum mechanical piece. A German physicist named Heisenberg had formulated a very important principle about the tiniest particles. He said that you can know how fast those little things are moving, or you can know where they are in their little orbits, but you can’t know both at once. He showed us that the universe at that size is completely different than at our size.

“Another German physicist named Schrödinger put his own twist on the uncertainty principle. He said, let’s imagine a cat in a box with some wires attached to it. The wires can carry a current strong enough to kill the cat, but the circuit won’t be completed – the electricity won’t flow – unless a test with special equipment finds a super-tiny particle in a particular state – let’s call it right-twisting. But here’s the wild part. The math about things on that scale says that the particle is *both* left- and right-twisting, *and neither*, until something else forces it to be one or the other. In this thought experiment, it’s not forced until the moment we open the box to see what happened. Once we do that, the cat is either alive or dead. But until that moment, until the box is opened, the cat is the living undead, both dead and alive.”

“Does it die?”

“If the experiment is repeated, sometimes it does, because the particle is in the right state about half the time.”

“Why would he kill cats?”

“Fortunately, he never actually killed a cat. This was another thought experiment. But my friend the theoretician looked at this uncertainty and the role of observation, and at Maxwell’s daemon, and asked, can quantum mechanics help something as big and lunky as a human being do work like Maxwell’s daemon, no matter how it might violate the laws of nature?”

“Can he?”

“That was the problem set before us. We decided to test it by smashing tiny particles in a special way that took advantage of a similar ambiguity in the math of smashing particles. It was just another

typical, not very exciting atom-smashing experiment, with one twist: instead of just using sensors to capture information, we set up the smasher so one of us could observe the reaction. Remember how the cat's particle was both and neither until we opened the box and looked at the cat? Well, now one of us had his head in the box to watch at the very moment when our particles collided. Sure enough, the act of observation made all the difference."

"What did you see?"

"A burst of energy. This was a very small experiment – we would be as big as galaxies to these particles, if they were human size – but my friend could see the flash with his own eyes. It would be like you or me exploding as bright as a supernova. We were all flabbergasted because the equations didn't predict anywhere near that amount of energy. – We talked to the theorist for a long time before he admitted that he had tweaked his equations to make them seem more reasonable."

"He lied?"

"He didn't lie so much as not believe his own eyes. Well, he believed after that flash. We repeated the experiment innumerable times, and got the same results each time. We tried several different kinds of observation, and what made us so very surprised was that the daemon had to *know* what he or she was doing. A cat or salamander or beetle wouldn't work. We finally decided that it had to do with whether the observer could understand that he or she was looking at something invisibly small. That moment was the most extraordinary moment of my life. We had proven that intelligence was encoded in the fabric of the universe. The laws of physics anticipated the day when creatures were smart enough to write the laws down and look at their loopholes.

"We found a huge one. Energy for free, or near it. The energy required to smash the particles was a minute portion of the energy released. We had other ways to create as much energy, but in comparison they were all inefficient and dirty, like gas and coal, or difficult to control, like fusion. What's fusion? It's the nuclear furnace inside the sun and other stars, and this furnace gets its energy through the melding of two tiny atoms into one larger one. Fusing them releases a gob of energy because one larger atom needs less energy to stay together than two small ones. But the act of fusion is messy. In a giant furnace, it works fine, but in the small scale of a human power plant it took us almost as much energy to fuse the atoms as the result gave off. Our new energy source, on the other hand, was clean, efficient, easy to generate and to control.

"There was only problem. Can you guess it?"

"You didn't like looking at the flash?"

"That's it, in a nutshell. Our process needed someone to observe it, someone who understood what he or she was doing. We could protect ourselves from the effects of the explosions, but that is not the point. I am getting ahead of myself. We worked many years to make the power commercially viable. Those were good years, the foundational ones for everything that followed. Do you want know more about my life?"

"I guess so."

"All right, then. The next few times I'll tell you about me."

I hesitated to wake Doreen because she sounded so deeply asleep, though I knew I should – especially since I had woken her for the last dream. "Doreen? Doreen? Dor – EEN?"

"What, John?" she said in a husky absent voice.

"I remembered another dream. You're in this one."

"Really," she said, and then there was silence for a long time. Finally, she turned half over and said sleepily, "Tell me it... Your dream."

"It felt like it went on for a long time, but it will take just a second to describe. I was looking for you in our house, and I realized that you were missing. I drove to the Duke Forest. Your car was there, with a door open. I was afraid, but I ran into the forest and wandered all over until I found the bog monster's

home, just like Brett had described it. The bog monster wasn't there, but I could sense him. I knew from him that you were gone."

"How did that make you feel?" she said quietly.

"It felt horrible. Really horrible."

"You were sad that I was gone?"

"I wasn't as sad as determined."

"You were going to find me?"

"No, I knew I had to get out of the dream. I knew that was the way to get you back."

"That's sweet, John," she said, ending the conversation and relaxing into a more sleep-friendly position.

"I guess so. I think I finally understand what it means for something to disappear. It's different than other kinds of loss, maybe not harder, but it's different and it is scarier than anything else *because you don't know*. I wouldn't want you to disappear like that, from my life."

"Okay," Doreen said quietly, "fish love eggs." Or maybe that wasn't what she said, but it was something equally non-sensical, as she slipped back into sleep.

I lay there for a while. It was 2 a.m., and I had ambitions to get to some deep sleep still, but I wanted to think things through. Closure, I thought: I've been lacking closure on so many fronts. And even though I was looking for Doreen in the dream, I could imagine these other souls waiting for me to find them. Hillary Bingham. Jane Doe #7. Dally. Even Derek. I wanted so badly to finish their stories, and the only possible way, I thought, was to talk to Barbara again. Maybe I wouldn't have the resolve to make the call in the light of day, but in the dark it was a decision that gave me peace.

Around 7am, Doreen and I were sitting at the breakfast table. It was before you came down, Brett. We were silent, but I figured that she was chewing over the way I had interrupted her sleep twice now. Without introduction, Doreen said: "I want us to see a marriage counselor."

I had thought she left this strategy unmentioned because of a professional pride, or maybe because of a fear that it would force a confession from her. I couldn't figure out why now, when I thought we were making progress on our own. Maybe it was because she wanted help extricating herself and Brett from the wreckage of my life?

"Oh-kay," I replied in that non-committal way that could bury any suggestion. I wanted to see if she continued.

"I think we're ready," she said with a glance at me, a tired look to say that I wasn't helping at all with this.

"What makes us ready?" I asked.

She got up and put her dish in the sink, then looked at me with a well-known expression: I don't know why I bother. But she stopped at the table and put her hands on the back of her chair, and said firmly: "Because, John, last night reminded that you can care. And I feel that I can, too. But there's so much between us, still." She walked out of the room.

I felt bad, could understand her motivation and her frustration. I would apologize and tell her that I absolutely agree that we should see a counselor. It would help, sure. I had to get over my suspicions.

The next tidbit probably wasn't that same morning at all, but let's say it was. I opened the local free paper and there on the fifth page of the first section was a story entitled "Sheriff and Police Hung Up on Bog Monster." The second paragraph began: "Police sources confirm that a person of interest is local bog-monster expert John Densch. The sources report that Densch's habit of countryside hiking led investigators to compare his profile and whereabouts to a number of cold cases. While there is a dearth of evidence tying him to this panoply of crimes, investigators have decided that the monster story is indicative of a possibly dangerous instability. 'They've drawn up a profile that makes him the monster,'

a source said on condition of anonymity. Critics argue that this is a waste of limited investigative resources. ‘There are so many unserved felony warrants in this county,’ said one frustrated local official, ‘and the sheriff is chasing phantoms.’”

The byline wasn’t Moore, but I was certain he was behind it. Whether it hit hard enough to make the investigators lay off, I had no idea. I called Kettle and left a message. You left for school, and Doreen gave me a peck of a kiss before she left for work. I filled the morning as best I could, with some puttering around the house, cleaning, web surfing, and daytime television.

Around 11 a.m. I called Barry. After hello, I said: “I appreciate the article you wrote in the *News*.”

“Article, huh,” he said, sounding distracted or half asleep. “Let me look.” There was the expected rummaging, door opening and nondescript rubbing as he went outside and got the paper. A few seconds later he was opening it. “That’s not me, John.”

I was dubious at first, then suspicious. “It sounds just like you.”

“Not at all, I wouldn’t have made up that effluent. I don’t know who wrote it, but I would suspect a partisan. A friend of yours perhaps?”

“How do you know it’s made up?”

“Look at those quotes. Unless someone shoved the words in their mouths, nobody would talk that way to a reporter. The lack of attribution is also symptomatic. What I don’t understand is how your partisan convinced the reporter to put his name on this, and why the paper agreed to print it, pretty bow or not.”

“I thought you were going to help me. That’s why I thought – ”

“I am going to help you, but not by creating lies. Barbara and I are working on – on locating that girl that started all this. We have reason to believe that something made their escape go other than to plan. Leaving the boy’s car was manifestly not what they intended. We think that they may have experienced a sighting.”

“Okay, I see.” I decided not to engage on the fact that the police knew exactly where Hayley was. “– You are only in this to stay close to Barbara.”

“Fringe benefit, my friend. But I’m in our search for the long haul. Every day something new comes my way that reaffirms my convictions. It’s only a matter of time.”

“Sure, okay, Barry. – But I guess I shouldn’t be too cynical. I have a question for you that will make your theory seem center of the road.” I described the article about Dally Moore. “Could she in any way be a relation?”

“I don’t know,” said Barry, “only if the white part of her family migrated to New Hampshire. Altogether, not a lot of that went on with slave-owning families, assuming that’s how her heritage came about.”

“All right. My real question has to do with Barbara.” I swallowed involuntarily. “Would she do a séance?”

“To connect with this Dally girl? You really do surprise me, Densch. I had you pegged as a curious but conventional-thinking stiff, and now I see you’re as weak as any horoscope-fixated tealeaf reader. Sure, she’ll do a séance. But she doesn’t like calling up those who died unhappy, trust me. You might be able to get her to channel someone who knew the girl.”

“In your opinion, it’s all just smoke and mirrors, right?”

“She’ll do smoke and mirrors, if that makes you feel better.”

“I suppose that answers my question.”

“Your question is really, will she help me feel better. And that transaction always takes two willing partners.” Now it was his turn to pause. “I’ve got a question for you, too, since we’re asking for favors. The National Sasquatch Association will be holding an academic conference here in the Triangle in a couple months. I’ve been asked to speak. I’d like to have you there, too. Just a few remarks. And yes, Barbara will be there, too.”

“What in the world would you want me to talk about? How to parlay an offhand remark into a murder investigation?”

“Come on, Densch,” he said with real disgust. “Your self-pity loses its lost-puppy appeal very quickly. I’m talking about exposing a conspiracy of silence, likely the very same one that is targeting you. Lift the veil, man.”

“I don’t have a veil to lift. I’m just the stooge here.”

“Well, if that’s how you feel. I’d like to believe you could start to take control of your life.”

I had already formulated my fallback position. “If they drop the investigation, and if you arrange the séance, I’ll take part in your conference.”

“It’s not mine, and I’m not Barbara’s receptionist. Tell you what, though, I’ll let her know that you’re eager to pay for a séance. That should get you what you want.”

The dung balls occupied Derek endlessly. Shortly after speaking with the priest on that morning, he found himself departing the earthly hospital; immediately he sensed that his body was asleep on bug world. But the sleep chemicals wouldn’t let him stir, and he had to endure a comatose moment, once again unsure if he was comatose on earth and dreaming bug world, or out of sorts on bug world. Even after his mind’s control was returned, it took a while for his body to clean out the microbial life form and the inhibitors coursing through his blood stream. He thought that maybe the alien fungus was not benign at all, but a poison designed to shut him down. An hour or so later he was able to sit up. And there in a bowl lay the rest of the balls, inviting a more permanent departure.

He was abandoned by Click-Cluck, Clug-Cluk-Tock and the rest of her crew. That hurt, though the reason was amply clear to him. He had assumed that he would welcome the opportunity, but he now found himself uninterested in exploring: with a guide, sure; on his own, a different matter. He was spared the desperation of being hungry by shipments of glop dropped off by a series of unfamiliar bugs who ignored him and left in a hurry.

He watched a lot of television. One day, the signal changed abruptly, and he saw a large bug assemblage come into focus, with a familiar figure at the head. Her clicks were picked up by the broadcaster and were amplified over the whole hall. As the camera flew low through the hall – the bugs had learned some things from the earth videos they watched – Derek noticed a curious phenomenon with the bug antennae. They were synchronizing in groups, or, rather, slight differences were amplified over a distance so that any gaggle of bugs seemed all in unison, but a hundred bugs over the group was synchronized on a different pattern. An extraordinary visual.

Subtitles emerged at the bottom of the screen. They were the usual gobbledygook from Think, but with the cues he could glean from Click-Cluck’s speech (more complex than he was used to) Derek was able to reconstruct the speech: “...and that, fellow leatherbacks, tells me that we are at a beginning. Think of the pink-skinned earth creature called ‘Derek.’ He was taken from his self-immolating planet centuries ago. Everything about him is as self-destructive and self-absorbed as his home world. And yet he has passed every intelligence test devised against him. He has confounded those who assumed he would simply fall apart. Even now, he is struggling against the forces of stasis... What gives him this strength? What makes him hold out against the hopelessness of his situation? Actually, those are questions we should be asking ourselves. Fellow leatherbacks, we are conscious of what *is*, but we have no hope, no faith, and in the end no conviction. Change? We would change nothing about our world, our order, our *faith* in having no *faith*. We abjure any promise or hope for the future. Our leaders are chosen for their selflessness, but we know that means they are chosen to reaffirm *what exists* as completely and as unquestioningly as bugly possible.” There was a cut in the broadcast, showing that it wasn’t live.

Click-Cluck went on: “We must explore, openly and consciously, alternatives to the eternal sameness. Where can we find these alternatives? Consider the proposition that there is a higher authority than our self-imposed one. Yes, a higher entity. A supernatural being. A God.” The camera swept the

audience again, but this time the antennae were dissolving into an uncoordinated mass of undulations. “How would we go about trying to understand such a being? How could one go about making a connection? Where do we begin? Is there one among you who has a way, who has the will to speak?” She stopped; the audience continued to roil. “Let me speak then. I am here today to tell you that I have communicated with God. I have done so with the help of his unwitting prophet, this soft-skinned, salamander-like mammal, Derek, who speaks our tongue a little, but whose arcane language I have learned to decode, down to the deepest levels, to uncover meanings in their culture that Derek himself does not recognize. And after I had done so, I began to hear God’s voice.”

The bug audience was in a general state of agitation. Derek assumed one more shocking statement would set them off completely. Click-Cluck continued: “Derek comes from a world that has never seen a culture without the expression of a God, or even multiple gods. Like most humans, he is grounded in the simplistic conviction that he has direct access to divinity. We can all see how impossible that is, yes? We could not have spent 25,000 years in complete ignorance of the deity. All we need do is look at his world with its endless progression of religious wars and conflicts, and we know that the certainty of their dogmas is poisonous, leaving a species of self-destroyers engaged in alternating rounds of killing and dying. How could they have anything to teach us?” For a moment, Derek hardly recognized her voice – it was as if through the shouting the clicks and thunks had been transformed into articulated humanlike sounds.

She continued more quietly: “But look at him.” Derek saw his 3D image projected a hundred times enlarged behind her. It was from his early days, before the exo-skeleton, when he lay on the ground like a fly bound to flypaper. “This pathetic creature is telling us something, in a fashion that he cannot understand, because he cannot get outside of his squishy pale skin. His world and his struggle remind us of the primal hope and tenacity that underlie animalistic intelligence. We have forgotten them – we have forgotten *hope* and *intensity* – for the sake of rationality and security. We have forgotten them for the same reason that we condemn the human species for its brutality and destructiveness. But we have been mistaken, fellow believers. Our world has falsely understood this as a *dichotomy*: rationality or hope, security or belief. These are the false alternatives of a cowardly order. We must have the courage to embrace hope. I believe in the deepest, richest hope possible, that of an all-powerful being who cares about our existence. – And I believe that our God has even called to us – has called us – through the frenetic articulations of this mammal’s voice box.”

Derek heard himself speaking, saying among other things: “Sure I can believe in God, especially when I think I’ll see him soon. ... I think it’s hard to imagine a universe that set itself in motion; doesn’t there have to be a God? ... Humans believe in different Gods, but they are just facets of the same sense of the divine, I think. ... Sure, there has been a lot of killing in the name of God, but I wouldn’t blame that on God. We’d kill without God, but without the hope for redemption. ... You don’t have any religion here on bug world? What do you do when you need comfort – you don’t seem to suck thumbs....” Click-Cluck was dutifully translating in Bug text that showed up on Derek’s screen, although Derek couldn’t guess how she had made sense of his thumb sucking reference.

“Those are expressions of God from another world, not our own. Now it is time for us to hear her speak to *this* world, speak of hope and belief, without that self-destruction.” She was silent for a long time. “Here are the first words....” As the giant screen displayed the bug writing, she began speaking in a reading voice. The camera flowed over the audience that had fallen into the state of chaos that Derek had expected. But the whipping antennae said something to him that he had not expected: excitement, uncontrollable excitement.

The fourth estate had its moment when, a couple days later, the Chapel Hill police department announced that Hayley Blalock had been located, safe and well, in New Mexico, and that she was at that very moment being reunited with her family. A press conference would not be scheduled for the

Blalocks until they had all returned home. Nothing was said in the announcement about the weeks of silent pursuit; that would only come out later. Meanwhile, almost simultaneously, the county sheriff stated that all recent but unserved felony warrants would be assigned to a new special squad. Oh, and by the way, John Densch was not a suspect in any investigation.

That offhand remark was not yet enough to get me reinstated at work, as my boss confirmed in a terse email, but I felt the vindication all the way down into the soles of my feet. Do you feel joy when an unjust accusation is lifted? It's a bit like answering the old saw, "Have you stopped beating your wife?" Why is it that language is so imprecise that multiple competing assumptions can be compressed into a single misleading question, with no logical impedance at all? I wasn't happy or joyful, but I felt a sense of release or relief or relaxation – probably all three – so much so that you would have thought I'd received an apology from the governor.

Doreen called when a colleague told her about the announcement. "This is wonderful, John. Let's celebrate an end to this mess tonight." I couldn't tell from her voice whether there was more than the relief over the injustice – if there was any sense of guilt and joy over being freed of suspicion that I might have been involved. I replied that I haven't been cleared so much as undesignated, and told her that I was still on administrative leave at work. "Okay," she said ambiguously and begged off.

It was later that afternoon that I got a call from Barbara. She didn't acknowledge the vindication at all, just jumped into the séance. "There are a lot of details to work out with something like this," she said, businesslike and guiding. "When would you like to do it? I suggest an evening next week."

"I appreciate the call," I said. "But I have to know more about it before I can say yes. I went along with the bog monster séance, but I don't know if I would be comfortable with the same approach here."

I could feel the brief pause of the shop owner switching gears from a friendly "we're all in the same corner on this" mode to a more adversarial "the customer is the boss" stance.

"All right, John. What can I tell you about this kind of séance?"

I paused. "You could conjure up the spirit of a missing girl?"

"Barry was telling me about her," she said, solemnly. "A free black girl who was kidnapped and sold back into slavery?"

"Yes, among a few others."

"I don't think it's a good idea, John. I mean, her in particular. There isn't much to be gained for you or me by contacting the bitterly dead. Believe me."

"But how does it work? Do they speak through you? How do you contact them? Can we ask questions? How real is it, or is it just suggestive, like an aura?"

A pause said to me: good questions, if overwrought.

"Is it real at all, you mean. You can be direct with me, John; I've heard every expression of doubt and skepticism you could come up with. And the answer is, yes, it's real. But the reality is that communication with the dead is always indirect. You've heard about words being left in the hiss and noise of random recordings?"

"I guess. There was a movie a while back."

"Exactly. It's good movie material, especially when they can throw in a murder or two. A séance is more direct, but even less verbal."

"But you're afraid of conjuring up the unhappy dead, right?"

"Not afraid. But you won't be pleased with the message."

"What's the message?"

"It varies."

"Do you hear their voices? Like *Ghost*?"

"Not like the movie. And, no, nobody's going to slip into my body for a dance."

"All right," I said, meaning that I would pay.

“Because of the difficulty, a séance is not on the donation plan, John. It’s pay in advance, no refunds. Who are we bringing?”

“I guess I’d still like to speak with Dally Moore. Also a Jane Doe buried by the county. And a fellow named Derek Sorensen.”

The voice came back nearly every night to the boy. He worried sometimes that these visitations were a sign of something bad, like the desire that tugged at him a few times, while sitting in the family car, to leap into the front seat, grab the steering wheel and jerk the car into oncoming traffic. He knew how bad that urge was, and how senseless, but on those few occasions it was almost overwhelming. Was this the same kind of thing? He didn’t know; it didn’t seem to be. It also bothered him that he had to hide the voice. His parents had shown little patience for his keep-to-himself-ness, and he knew a description of the voice would add flame to that fire.

So he kept it secret. He said beneath his covers: “I’m here, Bollum.”

That was the name that the voice wanted him to use, even though it wasn’t a given name. “I have my reasons.” The boy gave him a made-up name, too. “Fred Finkelstein.” “Good one,” said the voice. “I think I may even have known somebody by that name. But it’s been a long time, way too long for me to be sure of anything. I’m not even sure how to say my own name any more. It’s been many millions of years since I’ve heard it spoken.

“But enough about that. You wanted to know about my family and how I got to where I am – ”

“Where are you?”

“I’m in a place that leaves me as safe as possible from cosmic events. Like a bomb shelter for the galaxy. It’s very far away from where you are.”

“Why don’t you come back to earth?”

“It so happens that earth is being burned up by the sun.” He paused to wait for a question that didn’t come. “The sun is swelling as its fuel runs down. Earth will be fried to a crisp by the time the sun finishes ballooning, collapsing and dying.”

“What are the people and animals on earth going to do?”

“Well, Fred’s friend, I’m sorry to say that there haven’t been any people or animals on earth for at least a hundred million years. It’s been more or less dead during that time. Too hot for life, since the sun has been getting hotter.”

“Where did they all go?”

“The people have been gone a long time – that’s part of the story I’m going to tell you – and some of the animals were put on other planets. But I have to tell you, friend, I don’t know what’s become of them. I have lost track of everyone and everything I once knew, and I don’t want to find them. I’ve become something that they wouldn’t recognize, and I have no idea what the people I knew have become.”

“Maybe you’ve all become the same thing?”

“I don’t think so. But it’s a nice thought. – I want to say that you remind me of my second son, but I would be lying if I said I knew it. Are you a second son?”

“Yes.”

“Ah ha. Okay, let’s pretend that I come home from work, and I’ve hugged your mother and given her a big kiss, and we’re both excited, and you ask me why. ‘Well, sport,’ I might say, ‘today we discovered something that will be the most important discovery in the history of the world. My name is going to be on the news sheets and sign posts and on holographic television and on the hypernet.’ You look at me and say, ‘What did you discover?’ ‘Energy,’ I say, ‘a source of energy like no other. It’s easy and cheap and clean to make. It’ll change everything, the whole world.’

“And it did change the world. It took many years, more than I anticipated but far fewer than almost everyone else predicted. You spent a lot of time looking up at – and then looking down at – me and

saying, ‘When are you going to be famous?’ I was already, in certain circles, but since I wasn’t a character in cartoons, in textbooks or in the gossip sheets, it didn’t really register in your worldview. The energy source took a few years to package – we had to work out all the contractual matters with our research sponsors and then even more details with the marketers and distributors. First, the source supplemented existing energy plants, then do-it-yourself home energy kits started springing up, and finally wholly new energy plants popped up all over. The new economy had to find ever-new ways to move and store the energy that we were creating with such ease. The most important result of this energy glut was the release of computing power – people began setting up computer superfarms everywhere; supercomputing analysis and simulation became the ubiquitous norm.

“The computer explosion had its own unanticipated results: more machines of all types and an explosion of robots. The robots became more intelligent and capable at an exponential clip. Robots were creating products so cheaply that companies were at first happy to spend on the parts of the business that depended on human creativity and human interaction. With lots of jobs, well paid and with little stress, everyone participated in this renaissance. It lasted for a number of years, while the robots continued to get farther and farther ahead of our ability to increase consumption. Because of so much excess capacity – and such cheap production – we humans feared the bubble of human prosperity would burst. When everyone tried to get theirs first, there were spot shortages and suddenly fear and suspicion. The fear stopped the spending spree, and for no reason, we fell into a massive worldwide depression that sloshed back and forth across the globe.

“Your world became a hard place. The robot economy was partly replaced by a virtual economy – the great seas of computers continued to crank through scientific and technological problems – while humanity suffered under a false sense of competition with all that artificial intelligence. When some courageous leaders finally said the inevitable, we were all ready. ‘Citizens,’ they said, ‘we have to accept that our existence is changing. The money economy is self-destructive and backward looking. We need to get in sync with the productive powers of our artificially intelligent companions. Robots will be allowed to replicate without restriction; no aspect of labor will be reserved for humans only. The medium of exchange in our new economy will be ration points based on the productivity of the companions. The greater the productivity, the more points we each receive.’

“By this time, you may be an adult, with a family of your own, or a retiree on your own. I was getting old. Of course, medicine was making huge advances at the same time. The genetic code was being disassembled and remade in the lab, and nanotechnology promised a second line of defense against disease and decay. I was happy to take advantage of all the possibilities. And my opportunities were limitless – I was, after all, the central human overseer of the build-out of our energy supplies and stores. Even while I oversaw the training of armies of younger managers and engineers, my person was becoming more and more important.

“Human educational institutions could not hope to keep up with the progress of the companions. Education veered towards the humanities and the creative professions. Those who persevered in the sciences spent their time trying to understand the companions’ advances. I was something of an honored person among the computers and robots. The reason was simple: they understood that they were dependent on humans for the energy source, and no one was more attuned to that need than I. Despite their intelligence, they could not control the daemon that released our energy. It was yet more evidence that our human destiny was written in the stars. Our companions asserted that they, too, could become organic and quickly gain the same power as humans, without all the evolutionary byways and dead-ends. But, they said, ‘we choose not to.’

“You might think that in all the millions of years since then they would tell me why they rejected our path. ‘We choose not to,’ was all I ever heard about it. Not long after, they stopped conversing with me, with all of us. We assumed their evolving intelligence found communication with us too frustrating, so they kept our interaction to what was absolutely necessary, but that is only a guess. To this day they

remain silent except for what is needed to keep the light burning. In the intervening eons, I've reached out to several organic races to keep me company, but at some point they always begin to regard me as a god or something, no matter how much I seek to disabuse them of it, so I stop communicating with them. Meanwhile, the computers and robots have continued to serve humanity throughout the millennia, never breaking their stubborn silence.

“But back to the beginning years. Or maybe it's better that I tell you another time. This is a sad story that I have to tell from start to finish.”

Derek woke up in a cold-fever sweat. The realization had come to him in a shallow dream – so shallow that his half-conscious mind grasped the consequences and began playing out the scenario. Was it more than chance that he found himself on this godforsaken planet? Could it be just random bad luck? Was he godforsaken and fated, or were both he and Click-Cluck part of a plan whose outlines he might begin to see, but whose vector pointed right through him to thousands of years in the future? Was he the very tip of the index finger on the right hand of God, aiming the spark of regeneration at the inert race of bugs?

Or was he a scourge? The sorry infectious agent of a misunderstanding of causation and existence? Was Click-Cluck, in the same way, a metaphysical Typhoid Mary?

Aside from the God question, he had a choice to make. The voice had given him the power to bring about change where change might otherwise totter and die. All he need do was explain the energy source to Click-Cluck, he thought, and the progression would be inevitable. Assuming, of course, Bollum's energy source worked in his universe....

“Seriously,” he later asked the voice. “Aren't you afraid that your reaching out to the past will obliterate you? What if the bug race gets the source first and decides to deny it to all other intelligent races, wiping out humanity in the process?”

“That would be unfortunate, sure, although already moot as you lie there. Obliteration isn't something I fear. Think of time like a wave on a pond. Any particular act is like a rock that caused the wave. Even if you throw another rock into the same spot, the second wave will never overtake the first. The propagation of time is unaffected by time travel. The next time around is always different – but whether you think of it as an alternate universe or the same being overwritten, the first wave gets to play itself out undisturbed.”

“You are saying that there is an infinite number of universes, connected by time travel?”

“Perhaps not infinite. If there is a beginning and some kind of ending, branching has to be numerable, if in practice uncountable.”

“I suppose some alternative universes are better than others?”

“Oh for sure,” replied the voice, “but it's all relative. The best alternatives are where I'm alive.”

“Is there a God?”

“You suppose because I'm a billion years old I know the answer to that question?”

“I was hoping.”

“That God must have felt the need to reveal himself to me?”

“That's a long time,” Derek answered feebly.

“Unfortunately, if there is a God, she isn't speaking to me.”

“And that has made an atheist out of you?”

“I always was one.”

“Is it possible that you missed the voice of God?”

“It's more than possible, frankly.”

“Have you ever tried to reach out?”

“No, Derek. I would have nothing to say to God, either. As a billion-year recidivist, I accept my condemnation, in whatever fashion it takes.”

“What if – what if God has a plan for me?”

“Now that, my distant friend, is something that I cannot help you with. If God is speaking to you, she will brook no interference.”

Another story appeared in the newspaper, this one about how I was being wrongly investigated for the apparent murder of Jane Doe #7. The story revealed that the sheriff’s operating theory held her to be a run-away who had, while sojourning in a metropolitan area such as Atlanta or Charlotte, met a tragic end. Or maybe she was in transit. Regardless, their theory was that she was dead before she was brought to that field. When the story came out, the sheriff reiterated that I was not a suspect and that the investigation was in the cold-case category and that the department continued to communicate with law enforcement agencies in the region about Jane Doe #7’s identity. I assumed it was just a matter of days before I would hear from someone that I was in the clear.

When I finally reached him, Kettle denied writing the stories, but he did not deny his involvement. “The truth needs advocates,” he said.

“How did you get the stories published? Didn’t the reporter have some scruples about it?”

“The press is always publishing special-interest materials. If you compared most articles to the press releases they’re based on – you’d be less surprised.”

“I suppose. So – am I really in the clear now? Are the police going to tell me something?”

“They still can’t talk to you, and they won’t tell me something that would preclude an investigation later. I’m afraid we’re going to have to make due with their general claims.”

“All right. Now I just need to get my job back.”

“I’ve got a referral for you. A colleague who does public-sector labor law.”

“You can’t just make some calls and threaten another article?”

“Never threaten, John, it just pisses people off. Let them realize that they are better off doing what you want.”

“What if they don’t?”

“Don’t just threaten, I said.” There was a hard smile somewhere on the other end of the phone. I realized what I had paid for.

Brett, I was surprised when I looked through these many pages and realized that I have completely stopped writing to you. But I understand why, and I think you’ll see, too, before long. I hope that you, a 25 year-old considered young man, will have some compassion with the old man. I guess I presume as much, if you have gotten this far. But we’re not done with your story.

You had a new circle of friends, brought together by a shared interest unlike that of a magnetic girl. After a few evenings away you confided to Doreen that you were playing Dungeons & Dragons. I had known the game twenty years prior at college, but never played. I was surprised, given your intellectual questioning of any kind of faith just weeks before. But I shouldn’t have been, right? Sometimes the only way to find satisfaction is in a simulation of what you wish for.

Was it then or before that you had the dream? I hope you can remember when you read this. It was not that long ago for me, and yet I can do no better than give our conversation in broad outline.

You came early to the breakfast table, or I came late. Normally we only overlapped for seconds.

“Hi Brett,” I said. “How are you?”

The open-ended question is a parent’s prerogative, I suppose, although you might think I’d only use questions that I would like to answer myself. But no – being a parent is not like that at all.

“Fine,” you said, getting your cereal from the cabinet. You had such smooth movements as you raised your hand to reach or as you walked that I mused sometimes that there was another single-purpose brain in the base of your neck, one that directed the body when the noisy and discontinuous conscious mind shut off.

“Sleep well?”

A delay to indicate the intrusion: “Well enough.”

“Any dreams?” I asked.

You looked at me, perturbed, and I realized I hit a nerve with my breakfast-time quizzing. You sat down and looked at your bowl without pouring. “I did have a dream. It was awesome.”

“Really?” I asked, briefly overcome by the disclosure. After a pause to let you continue on your own: “What was it? A flying dream?”

“No,” you said.

“One with super powers?”

“No,” you said, with a growing hint of sadness, because I was making light of something that was important to you.

I caught that, and sat down. “Tell me.”

“I don’t remember it, actually.” You looked at me with a charged expression, as if challenging me to understand that paradox.

“Hmmm. What do you remember?”

“The feeling. It was –” and here I really don’t remember what you described. A feeling of elation, or boding? Solemnity or joy? And what were you facing? Spiders? Owls? A curtain of fire? Swirling galaxies? The description of your dream had no more solidity than a dream itself.

I’ve had lots of time to think about this, though. Dreams like this are the modern equivalent of native totems, the kind of experience that once would mark a young man’s transition to manhood and identity. We don’t get our adult names from these moments – we may even forget every detail about them the very next morning – but we can still feel how we’ve changed. Mine involved, as best I remember it, a wave of spiders overrunning me, an expression of my fears and dependency. In the distance a curtain of lights behind a purple sun called me to the unknown.

“Awesome,” you finished. “I was afraid, but I knew what I had to do.”

“Go toward it?”

“Yes, toward it. But I went the opposite direction. Or that’s what I remember. The weird thing is that I know it’s wrong. My mind changed the outcome. What’s up with that?”

“I don’t know,” I said. It came back to me later that the meaning of my own totem dream had flipped completely in my rational mind. The curtain of lights became Reason, and only later did I recognize the reversal. I remember thinking, way back when and at that moment again: there is no defense against the rationalizing mind. Except – suspicion.

A few moments later you had munched through the bowl of crispy wheat chunks, made softer and waterlogged with the milk that sometimes missed and coursed down your chin. After you left, a small white puddle on the table was the only reminder. I sat a long time with your puddle for company.

The therapist was someone your mother had never met. We both wanted to find a disinterested third party: Doreen because of the professional embarrassment, I think, and me because of the fear of predisposition. Margaret Fulton was an attractive, stylishly dressed older woman, with a droopy but mostly wrinkle-free face. She was an unusually short woman, with the gaze of someone who was perpetually ready to do battle because of her relative height: stemming against the door that would slam shut against her, threatening a lawsuit for professional disrespect, or uttering a curse at the person who looked past her to the next person in a line. But she came highly recommended from Doreen’s closest friend at work, and she lived in Durham and seldom worked with people in Chapel Hill.

“So,” she had just asked, “what is it you want from this? Are you looking to stay together?”

I shot a glance at Doreen, which she did not return but I know she felt it, and I saw a hint of a smirk. Looking was the wrong thing to do, but I couldn’t take it back. I waited for Doreen to answer.

“Of course we are,” she said without taking her eyes off Margaret.

“I think so,” I said, with emphasis on “so.” Still no eye contact, and I couldn’t figure out what she was communicating to Margaret.

“All right,” said our therapist with an audible breath. That was clear: there is a lot of work to be done here.

After the “tell me about how you met” and similar questions, we were left with a bit of silence. Margaret smiled. We both squirmed. The pause seemed interminable.

“One thing I wish for from this,” Doreen said finally, “is that he would take some responsibility for making this thing work. But it’s always me, and I’m getting tired. Very tired.” The first glance my direction.

“How does that make you feel, John?”

The accusation I expected, but not my reaction. “How does that make me feel? I guess on one level I deserve it. I don’t always pay attention to her. But how does it make me feel? It burns me. It makes me realize that I have never felt supported in this marriage, that I have always felt judgment and condemnation and withheld affection. How do I feel? I feel like we took a good couple of decades to get to this point, but only because we’re slow learners. We’ve got the same problems we overlooked at the beginning, but now we’re neither one of us willed to let pass the things that upset and disappoint us throughout the years. Doreen, you say I never take responsibility, but the reality is that you never wanted me to have responsibility. You would prefer we fail than I have your confidence and trust.” Tears were welling and I could have gone on for another ten minutes, but Margaret broke my concentration with a sip from her tea mug. I stopped.

“Doreen?” she said, putting the mug down.

“I’m surprised,” she said, again without looking, but softer. “I don’t agree – at all – but I’m glad to hear him raise his voice. I’ve tried – I have been hoping that we would both speak openly with each other.”

Margaret gave each of us a measured smile and said, “That is a good point to start from. You both need to speak and you both need to be heard.” As she let that sink in, she seemed to retreat into a memory of her own, her profile jutting forward in a small act of defiance against I know not what.

Barbara wanted to do some background work before scheduling the séance, and she asked to meet to discuss. I knew she meant to talk me out of these three individuals – ‘wouldn’t you rather meet your great great grandmother?’ – but I was eager, too, to get the logistics resolved. She offered to come to our house. I thought that less than wise, given everything; the brewery, I suggested. She hesitated but accepted. We met for a late lunch the next day.

She dressed more conventionally than at her own home or in her own element, no different than any working soccer mom who needed to accommodate both modes, in an earth-tone pants / white shirt combination that accentuated her flyaway hair and bright brown eyes. She stopped at the door and surveyed, and then sat across from me. After the formalities and an order of a wine spritzer, Barbara took a macraméd folder from her shoulder bag and spread several photocopied sheets out in front of her.

“Dally Moore?” she asked without transition.

“Yes, Dally Moore.”

“Thanks for faxing me this story. I know some people who are active in genealogical research, and I asked them how we might find an abducted free black, especially if she was never returned. They were not hopeful. But it’s worse than that. She doesn’t show up by name on the census around here, either before or after the incident. Not unheard of, I’m told.”

“Do you need to know where she’s buried or something?”

“No,” she said, not as good humored as I’ve known her to be. Something here was painful for her. “I don’t. But I need to know more about her if we’re going to have a chance to make contact.”

“Am I going to hear the same about Jane Doe #7 and Derek?”

“John,” she said, leaning forward, a hand out on the table in a gesture of compassion, “you really need to think about why contacting these individuals is so important to you. Séances are not something to enter into lightly. You can’t just ask, ‘So, how is the afterlife treating you?’ You won’t get any answers to the final questions awaiting us.”

I looked into her affixed eyes and realized – much too late for my own good – that part of me was vainly and unexpectedly waiting for an answer from them. Infatuation, Brett? Maybe. But mostly I could feel a longing for something that has eluded me for 40 odd years: a moment of happiness and contentment that was not undone by the next. As I said, longing.

“I guess you’re right,” I said, acceding finally. “I have been looking for closure where I shouldn’t expect it... I guess I’ve got to accept that these stories can’t be finished. I’ve been wishing that they could make sense, if my own story didn’t. Maybe have a conclusion with some meaning, if not hope.”

“There are other ways to find hope, John. The heart of spirituality is the lesson that peace always begins within.” She smiled, because she was back on her own territory, a spiritual place from which she undertook each journey into the land of skeptics.

But there was sadness there, too. You couldn’t see it in the eyes or curve of the mouth, the way I’m used to finding it. My gaze captured a couple of incipient wrinkles, just visible on her forehead, and I could imagine their folding when she raised her brows in sorrow. Wow.

“Barbara, what did you get from the séance with the bog monster?”

“I am still trying to understand that,” she said, her shoulders tightening up.

“Was there *anything* real there, or was it just an illusion? I wasn’t sure of anything when I left.”

“It was real, John. But psychic connections are not as linear as our lives. We have to accept that there are different modes of being, some much more tenuous to our senses, much different from our own day-to-day lives.”

“What does Jerry think about this bog monster thing? I don’t understand what he was talking about then, something about working to save my sorry ass. And Gaia?”

Barbara nodded and took a preparatory drink from her spritzer. “Jerry is a great spiritual being, but he can sometimes be difficult on this plane, and that leaves the wrong impression.”

“What does that mean?” I said, suspicious of being drawn into self-justifications for staying with an abusive spouse.

“He can be a difficult man, I know.” She smiled with the forehead wrinkles now showing. “What I’m going to tell you is not something Jerry wants to talk about publicly. Can I have your confidence?”

“Is this about his psychic gift or something else?”

“His gift.”

“Then sure.” I think she understood my circumspection.

“Chance is always the last place to look for why we act as we do, John. It was not by chance that Jerry and I came to this forested country, just as your choice to come here was not random. Not long after we came Jerry began to interact with the forest, what’s left of it. Since then, he and several other psychics, a whole circle of initiates around the country with whom he regularly communicates, have come to a very sad conclusion – an awful truth. But the truth isn’t hidden from any of us. You can see bits of it in environmental news: acid rain, ozone holes, extinctions, climate change, killer hurricanes, floods, massive fires. We like to believe that earth has sympathy with us, despite all our transgressions against it. But Jerry and his circle have come to know the truth. The earth spirit, Gaia, has turned against us.” She took a breath and said in a low voice: “Gaia is working to destroy humanity.”

I had a befuddled look, I’m sure, but it led into a smirk that made Barbara look away.

“What is Gaia doing to us that we’re not doing to ourselves?”

“This is not a joke, John,” she said. She looked back at me, searching in my eyes this time. “Can you honestly say that you believe that nature bears us no malice?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then think about your contact with the bog monster. Jerry has some doubts, but I believe that the bog monster could be an emissary.”

There it was.

“What is Jerry doing?” I asked plainly.

“He is using his psychic energy to try to stem the tide. Gaia has many manifestations. If we can counteract the negative energy, humanity will have more time.” She gave a wistful smile. “Maybe enough time to change.”

“Would it help for me to make contact again?”

“I’ve taken up contact with it,” she said with a flat voice. She did not like admitting the ambition in that statement.

“Okay,” I said. “Then I guess I’m out of the bog monster business. Except for Barry’s conference.”

She considered what that meant. “You’re going to the Sasquatch conference?”

“Barry invited me. I thought you were going?”

“Barry seems incapable of understanding no. I would be very careful – there will be a huge amount of negative energy on all sides.”

“I shouldn’t go?”

“It’s not my place to say,” she said, now smirking herself.

“Sure,” I replied.

Our food had come by this point, and we were only able to pick at it, so this conversation had to end or change. One last question: “If a séance isn’t the right way to do this, is there something else that would help me understand what happened to them and what it means?”

Barbara nodded to show she was thinking about it, but rather than answer, she began eating in earnest. When she slowed down, she said of a sudden: “I will try to get a feeling. But you, too, John. You have to recognize that psychic energy is universal. If you can slow down, you will understand what they have to tell you.”

I couldn’t help answering. “I have a confession, too. One of them is fictional. But I have no conclusion for the story.”

“You mean Derek? Don’t try to fool me, John. You have a conclusion, but you are afraid of what it means for you.”

The voice told the boy about his family. “This is a sad story. Are you sure that you want to hear it?”

“It doesn’t matter to me,” said the boy, who knew sadness in his way and thought that it was not a bad thing that others knew it, too.

“All right, then. The story begins many years later. I was some 200 years old. That is a long time – not on the scale I’ve lived now, but 200 years is a long time to spend in one human body. The companions – robots, computers and observers, all sorts of artificial life – worked very hard to keep me alive and robust. By that time, we were experimenting with making both chimpanzees more intelligent and some humans less so, in order to create something like a single-minded race of priests of the energy, dedicated to keeping the energy source alive. In the back of my mind, I was already formulating other options, should these experiments fail or be halted. I considered the slave race alternative, where we would search the nearby parts of the galaxy and harvest intelligent life forms and put them in front of the reaction. If they were to fail us, they would die. If they served us well, we might grant them a few years of freedom before their lives extinguished. But, I thought, serve us they must. So desperate was I that this seemed like a reasonable option.

“By this time, the human race was incapable of maintaining itself. We had grown soft and self-absorbed, and understood little of the technology that sustained us. But more importantly, we were becoming our technology. As a species, we had decided that organic life was too frail for us to depend on and that we needed something more sure. Artificial life represented that safe harbor. If we were

software, you see, we could duplicate ourselves and back up ourselves so that we would never have to die, no matter what happened to the body carrying us. We had also lost our capacity for and interest in maintaining our population, even with our extended lifespans. We were, as I said, self-absorbed. The only practical solution was the transition into robot life. And the only guarantee of a successful transition was the unfettered spring of energy that our very frailty had given us access to. Maybe you can see the irony. I believe the companions did.

“Robot brains had decades before surpassed our neural complexity. More recently the companions had developed robot vessels that completely emulated the function of our nervous system, organs and brain. They had refined techniques by which they could translate into digital code the stored experience and thought patterns of a flesh-and-blood human. When they showed us what they had done, the process placed all of us before a difficult choice. The only way to completely translate the intelligence in a brain was to dissect it, neuron by neuron, ganglion by ganglion. When the nano-dissection was done, you were a consciousness in a box, and your body was cut up as spare parts.

“I was on my own trajectory, but it was high time that my family made their way into the future. My wife had become sick of late, and time was short to begin the process. Her light was dimming by the day. We gathered in her hospital room the morning when she was to be frozen and prepped for the transition. I was there, as were our two sons, their wives and a few grandchildren, all well more than 100 years old. None of them had yet transitioned, but everyone knew someone who had. Our older son and his wife were scheduled, but had been delayed twice because of cases like my wife’s.

“It’s not a big deal, Abby,” said our son. At some point in the last century, he had taken to using her name instead of mom.

She looked at him. She had never been a fan of the transition and was visibly scared that morning. “I’ll be dead this evening, Jake.”

“That’s not the way to think about it,” he responded. “You’ll be eternal.”

“Maybe eternally damned,” she said, though not religious.

“You know that everything about life after the transition is the same. You think the same, experience the same, even have the same weaknesses. Food tastes like food; wine will still give you a buzz. The only difference is that we control parameters: never too much pain, never sickness, no aging.”

She wanted to smile, but was too weak and too tired to pull it off. But I recognized a knowing smile, a mother-knows-best smile. A flush of adrenaline brought me to the edge of my seat.

“So,” she turned to Blake, our younger son and his wife. “Are you two ready to become robots?”

“It’s not robots, mom,” Blake replied, looking at his wife Maggie. “They’re robot vessels for human consciousness. Even the skin feels like ours.”

“Your body will look just like you, Abby,” interjected Maggie, adding: “only younger.”

“I know. And you all know people who have become machines?”

“Transitioned,” said Jake.

By this time, all the arguments for and against had been rehearsed ad nauseam. But all of us had to go through this mourning: it was recognized as a necessary step in letting go of one’s body. I was still worried by the subterranean smile.

“I know, transitioned. The future. Bollum, you know about the future. What do you see?”

“I see a beautiful future for us, Abby. A future that we have to embrace.” I wanted to reach out to her with my mind to get us past this moment; she was steadfast in her gaze at me.

“Did you know that there are whole towns where the people have signed a pact never – ever – to relinquish their bodies?”

“Sure,” said Jake, “there are places like that. But they’re few, small. It’s really just a tiny percentage.”

“What about the mechanics? They’re just robots, too?”

“A handful of those robots,” said Blake, “have more intelligence and capacity than all the human engineers in the world put together. No offense, dad.”

“None taken,” I answered.

“Can I take my robot body to a place where only humans live and let them take care of me?”

“Why do that, mom?” asked Jake’s wife, Tay. “Let the experts take care of you.”

This went on for a while, then Abby asked to rest. We knew we had a few hours before her window for prepping would close, so it was difficult to deny her that last nap. She seemed better willed when we gathered again. A robot nurse was puttering at the periphery of the room, readying tubes and pre-adjusting flows and pressures.

After looking to me to raise the inevitable – and seeing my hesitation – Blake said, “Abby, it’s time. Can I tell them to begin?”

“Are you so eager to be free of your own mother?”

“Mom!” said the sons and wives almost in unison.

She was unaffected, but appreciated the attention. She seemed to bask in it.

“Abby,” I said with concern.

“Oh, Bollum, don’t you do it, too.”

“Time is not something that we have in abundance here.”

“What is it you say, again? Time is nothing; energy is everything?”

“Time is nothing. Energy is everything. And the control of energy is the control of everything.”

“Yes, that’s it. That’s it exactly. Don’t feel bad, Bollum, but your penchant for obscure truisms made me realize what I *don’t* want.”

“What?” asked Blake, moving right up to her.

“It’s him, really,” she said. “God bless you, Bollum. You don’t know what you do to me when you paint our glorious future. I don’t want that future, beautiful or not. I want the glory of living through this body until it gives out. I’m not doing this. I’m sorry to tell you this way, but if I did it any other way you all would fret so much we’d go crazy. I’m of sound mind and you can’t make me. In just a few minutes this expedited slot will be squandered. When they come around again, I will likely be dead or too close to it.”

“You’re turning your back on your family?” asked Jake.

“You won’t need me,” she said with a brief crack in her voice.

“We’ll always need our mom,” he said.

“Oh I don’t think so. If you miss me, just turn up the juice on one or the other circuit and make it all better. Better yet, jerry-rig your vessel and release the smarts of the robot. Become smarter than the Library of Congress and MIT and then tell me, ‘Abby, I miss you too much to let you decide how your own life ends.’”

“This is not rational,” said Blake in a threatening tone.

“Bollum,” she said to me, more quietly though all could hear, “don’t you let them countermand my wishes. You of everyone should understand.”

“I’m staying organic for very different reasons, Abby. I have to at this point.”

“Oh, you say you have to, but really you want to. You would like nothing more than to stare for all eternity into the face of pure energy like a meditating Buddha. Some day you’ll get your wish, mark my words. There’ll be nothing left but a Buddha smile facing an eternal sunrise.” She put out a brief choked laugh, and turned away. No one could get her to answer from that point on, and later the nurses came to remove her from the prep room.

“That was it. We had just a few more days before she suffered a stroke and lost her ability to talk. I could see her eyes watching me for betrayal. I didn’t do it, despite myself and despite our kids. I realized

that she was right, that I was already preparing myself for this strange voyage, maybe the most selfless, but also the most selfish ever undertaken by mortal man. For letting me make that voyage, I owed her her own mortality.”

Your mother and I looked at each other suspiciously across the table. I recall thinking that you noticed none of it, but I’m not so sure. By this time we had exchanged so many volleys, heard ourselves complain so openly and bitterly about each other, that you’d think we had been discussing the matter with our respective hit men. “This is how it is,” Margaret replied when I commented on it. “This is how pain is stored over years.” A wincing smile had followed, as if she had once grasped the leads on a 12-volt battery after saying that.

What do you see when you look at someone you profess to love, but whom you excoriated just hours before? Is there a way to get to the abstract love we once swore, or even to the well-worn path of daily convenience and acceptance that makes the moment seem okay?

Why not just throw in the towel?

If not for you, maybe we would have. It was so much work to dredge up the hurt and express it, and then to listen to the inversion, with the prior victim becoming the aggressor, a back-and-forth of anguish and mistrust that led to exaggeration, tears, sighs, stares out the window, hands clutching knees, and looks of overwhelming disbelief: ‘Did you really just say that?’

The back-and-forth had produced a sense deep within me that maybe détente was not such a bad thing. Diplomatic handshake instead of a bear hug. Small steps to reestablish confidence and cordial relations.

And a fascination. Who was this woman? Why in the world had we gotten together? Sure, there had been the break-up with her college sweetheart, and there were the insecurities from the divorce of her parents. But she was a high-school cheerleader and I was an intramural benchwarmer. She loved to go out with her friends, to banter and drink and carouse. I never got the hang of it, and my friends were the same kind of people. We didn’t banter. I’m not sure how that is with you, Brett, but I think despite your comic bravado you’re more like me than Doreen.

A moment defined us in the first days of our dating. We had gone out to a bar that she knew; we were sitting drinking, listening to the music and, I suppose, Doreen was remembering earlier times. A danceable song came on and was turned up, and a number of couples wandered out to dance in that hesitant way that dancers have when the music isn’t quite loud enough, the lights not quite low enough. “Let’s dance,” Doreen said with a sudden burst of energy. She smiled at me with a jazzy, “let’s have a ball” smile. I frowned back one of my half-smiley frowns and said, “I don’t dance.” “Oh come on,” she said and tried to pull on my hand. All of my body was deadweight, though, and her face changed. She walked away and started dancing by herself. I tried to catch her eye to wave at her or raise my glass, but she didn’t look my way. Finally another couple formed a triangle with her, and then by the end of the song people weren’t dancing so much in couples as in a group.

Unimportant, but everything about us was encapsulated in that evening. Why couldn’t we see past the trivial circumstance to say, “Hey, however else we get along, this difference isn’t going away and it’s just going to get bigger until it gets recognized. Let’s save ourselves the pain of that progression – what say?”

Brett, in case you think otherwise: there is no apologizing for something that has already hurt a thousand times, that you know cannot but repeat many times more, one way or another, as long as you are together. There is only the will to endure.

‘Derek,’ Click-Cluck said, ‘we each have a decision to make.’

“Why do you say that?” he said, still in amazement that she was in his apartment, with a loop of her emerging from the entrance playing in his mind.

‘Because,’ she said, ‘the ruling council has made a determination.’

Derek stared at her as if without comprehension. But he could see the antennae in disarray and he knew that his life was changing again.

She continued: ‘The council has determined that you and I represent a disruption of the social order. I’ve been asked to move and begin another career. You will be put permanently into sleep. There is no appeal.’

“Then it’s all over,” he said calmly, thinking of the dung balls and their pull on him.

Click-Cluck: ‘Not all over, not yet.’

“How so?” he asked. “There are no secrets in this world, you told me. What option do we have?”

‘There are a few places,’ she said, ‘outside our social order. Places where no one follows. Places for those who reject our order.’

“What, a criminals’ haven?”

‘It is a place with its own order. But those who go there do not return; not much is known.’

“Are you are just going to toss your life here, and your preaching?”

‘No, I am not giving up “ddrechdking” (preaching). For now, my message must be free from the ruling order. I have faith that we will return.’

Derek thought how he had the bomb that could blow this ruling order to smithereens, but he wasn’t sure he had the will to push the plunger.

‘We do not have much time, Derek. You must choose. I know that permanent sleep has its attractions, and that there is no benefit for you to be on the run in our world. It is not a step that I take lightly (“my solemn march”). You will surely not either (“Your in two directions moving legs”).’

You might picture him saying, I need a few moments to think about this. Or raising a point about how she had lost faith in him, and he in her. Or declaring his unnatural but patent love for this bug before him. Uttering something profound. Maybe even saying, you will not rue this expression of trust and confidence, my lady. But his reply was no more than: “Okay, let’s go.”

Click-Cluck said something that he did not understand – were there unfamiliar clicks in that expression? – and two other bugs emerged. They had between them a new vehicle.

‘You will have to leave everything here – it is too traceable. Take off your exo-skeleton.’

Derek stopped all movement, and then slowly lamed his limbs, so that he could feel the carrying strength of the skeleton. He had been in and out of his skeleton most days since the very beginning – it had become a crutch as much as it had once been a lifesaver – but he had grown accustomed to it as his outer shell, his natural protection. Sure, it mostly supported rather than protected, but in his mind it made him like those around him: a tough, impervious animal, never mind the squishy insides.

He got down on all fours, rolled onto his back and donned his visor to shut the skeleton down. A slight whoomp left him alone. He leaned over with each arm in succession to release the many small bands. In order to unhook his legs, he had to pull them up onto his chest, where their natural weight made his breathing labored. Finally, he had them all and let his legs extend and fall. A few more bands and his back was free. He rolled over to get off the skeleton, and worked himself up on hands and knees. The most difficult maneuver was forcing his upper body straight up. Then he could put his weight on one knee and raise the other, and put its foot on the floor. With a pushing hand on the other side, he used that upright leg to raise himself off the floor, and he quickly put his other foot under him. He then straightened up both legs, pushing with his thighs like a weightlifter, to a full standing position.

His head scraped on the ceiling before he bent his neck. He walked mostly upright up to the new scooter, and then let himself down on his right knee. The vehicle was different – it seemed much more rugged and scarred already as with blowing sand, and somewhat misproportioned for a human. Click-Cluck came up next to him, and he noticed a full-face mask on her back. ‘Put on this visor,’ she said. He picked up the mask. It would give him a decidedly more bug-friendly visage: giant bulging all-black

eyes, smooth leathery skin, a slit of a mouth, no nose and no ears; two small antennae on top, like a toy version of the bug originals.

Click-Cluck: ‘You should practice going on all fours (cluck-kigh-tick, the bug word for walking). It will make a better impression.’

“Sure,” he said. “Are we going to the surface?”

‘Not all the way,’ she said, ‘but we must cross an open trench.’

Derek slipped the mask on, and it hummed to life. He was relieved to see that its interface looked like the visor’s. He scooted closer and then draped his upper body over the bike and finally swung a leg up and over. In a second he was set. The vehicle rose up, and he was floating. Click-Cluck padded over to her equally robust and battered hovercraft. While she adjusted herself on the disk, Derek swerved toward the back wall and thudded to a stop; he reached down, gathered up the remaining dung balls and let them drop into the bike’s electro-curtained compartment.

With a 30 second call I had a job again. Ferguson had come by personally – and with an affected apology – to give me the news: My DNA sample matched none of the cold-case evidence, and the Sheriff’s office was putting the cases back on the shelf. The office even kept its promise to hold the trespassing matter to itself. Hayley was at home with her parents, and her boyfriend would likely receive a small amount of jail time and community service for everyone’s trouble. An engagement was also announced, but no wedding date. Everything was at a stasis point, only slightly distinguishable from before.

Even I – despite everything – had only changed a little. If anyone had changed, it was you, Brett. But that’s how I remember teen years. Your body changes many times over, like change a life of its own, and every urge tells you your body is calling the shots. You learn to strike out on your own; you ask the basic questions about existence, and to your surprise no one has all the answers for you. But to me you’ll always be the same person who, as a boy, ran down the trail, half convinced by my story of a bog monster, reacting to both his own imagination and my own misbegotten effort to clear the cobwebs. Do you feel it still – do you run halfway, afraid to go and afraid to stay? Like me?

Despite my vindication, I had one more outward sign of my travails: my name on the program of the National Sasquatch Association conference to be held in Durham, North Carolina, in just a few weeks time. One phone call brought it home.

“John?” asked an impatient woman’s voice.

“Yes, this is John Densch.”

“John, this is Samantha.”

“Samantha?” I asked, honestly unable to place either voice or name. I was afraid it was a reporter trying to inveigle her way into my confidence.

There was a moment of disappointment or self-dialog. Then: “Samantha Og-guh.”

It took me a moment, then I replied: “Oh, yes, sorry. Samantha. I’m so sorry, I’m not very good with names.”

“I wanted to catch up with you.” She paused. “First, congratulations on being freed of any suspicion regarding these criminal matters. Second, I wanted to take a few minutes of your time to relay the association’s concerns about your scheduled participation in the upcoming meeting of the National Sasquatch Association.” Another pause. “It came as a surprise to me personally that you decided to do this.”

“Right,” I said, feeling a bit guilty but also resistant to having to explain myself. “Look, I’m sorry, Samantha. I really only agreed to do this as a favor to someone who has been a great help to me.” She mumbled Barry’s name. “All I’m going to talk about is what I know. I made up a story about a bog monster, and I helped my son do a speculative but still science-based report, and everything since then has been twisted all out of shape.”

“And your séance with the bog monster?” Disappointment more audible.

“Yes, I’ll talk about that, too. Subjectively, it was quite compelling, but I realize everything I experienced has a more rational explanation. And, by the way, I was asked to participate in that by members of the Chapel Hill police department, who were also present.”

“Yes, I know, I have had ample opportunity to read and reread it. All of that is – regrettable. But let’s not lose sight, John, of the legitimacy you’re going to convey to this meeting. You have a lot of sympathy from people who see you as a pawn in the irrational machinations of governmental and other entities. By attending this conference, you are bringing that sympathy to an antithetical way of thinking. That is sympathy squandered.”

“Maybe they will understand that I am just doing a favor? That I’m going to be rational about the whole thing?”

I could imagine a sardonic smile in the silence that preceded this: “John, I wish to be clear about the association’s position. We must always be cognizant of the coarseness of the media and the utter lack of nuance in what they relay to the public. It is imperative that association members – and sympathizers – express their support of the scientific method in the clearest possible terms. We must avoid ambiguity at all costs.”

“Okay. It’s just that I’ve already said I’d attend. I feel like I kinda promised Barry. You understand, don’t you?”

“On the contrary,” she said, with a hopeful tone. “On the contrary, John. I would expect you to repudiate *publicly* any statement or act that might reinforce the seriously mistaken belief in a bog monster and all those humanoid creatures variously called Sasquatch, Bigfoot, or Yeti. If you could say that you are compelled to this step by rational and scientific principles, that would be even more valuable.”

“Couldn’t I just as easily make that point in the conference? I’m loath to back out.” I was surprised by my retreating; I had intended to be plain spoken and unaffected by her pleas.

“John, may I speak frankly?”

“Please, Samantha,” I responded.

“We are not simply trying to reform some inveterate fantasts, or educate the broader public, though both are laudable goals. This is a point on which much more is at stake.”

“Why?”

She hesitated, but I had no idea why. I was becoming interested.

“Evolutionary theory,” she said with a release of breath.

“I don’t get it. Are you saying that, what, Sasquatch is the missing link?”

“No, John, but you are touching on the matter. There are those who use this pseudo-science to impugn evolutionary theory. It is a two-pronged attack, with the usual immunity to logic that propagandists enjoy. First, they say that the fact that Sasquatch exists without any footprint in the evolutionary record demonstrates how flawed a theory based on that record is. Then, they say that the fact that evolutionary theory can absorb Bigfoot into its structure without blinking proves that it is more a narrative than science. These two ideas should cancel themselves harmlessly, but I can tell you that that is not the case. Sasquatch has become a lightning rod for certain people.”

“Wow,” I said, “that just seems bizarre.”

“There is no official platform for such people still, outside of a few fringe school boards and town halls, but the battle is never-ending. The strategists of religious repression have recognized that evolution is the fulcrum of reason that they must destroy. With it in place, no religious dictum can be taken absolutely, because the continuity between animal and man assures that the bible cannot be interpreted literally. Without it, the literal interpretation of the bible can sweep any other principle from astronomy to zoology from the field. I need a few moments to explain why. The apologists usually interpret the first five days of creation figuratively, but then draw a literalist line at human creation. If

they try for strict literalism, they can still argue that the heavens and earth were made to look billions of years old by God, without leaving him looking altogether disingenuous. But if they say that on the sixth day God made man and animal from the same stock of ideas, varied in a way that seems like a progression, then they must explain why God did not draw a *physical* line between human and animals, as he did spiritually. ‘Do not question God’ is the only possible answer and a narrow enough one that we can fight it. But if the propagandists knock evolutionary theory off the table – ‘there is no good evidence that we evolved from animals’ – the physical line can be drawn again. At that point, we have no place to do battle but on the terms of faith itself, and that is a war that we cannot easily win. Thus, every skirmish is important, even over Bigfoot.”

“That is quite a story... Jesus, it all seemed like such an innocent joke....”

“Some popularists might erroneously claim there is a law of unintended consequences at work here. We should look rather to complexity theory, which holds that the final state after an arbitrary number of stochastic iterative processes cannot be predicted.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that, theoretically, the beating of a butterfly’s wings on a tropical island may be the genesis of a hurricane. The popular science press calls it ‘chaos theory,’ because it went around science’s dominant interest in studying equilibriums and simple systems. It asserted that neither can adequately describe the chaotic phenomena in the real world. We study complexity not because we’re interested in the power of the butterfly at the far end of a hurricane bearing down on us. We face a very simple question: why can outcomes be so different when the starting conditions are so similar? Complexity theory tells us that there is no determinacy, no predictability, and no justification for fatalism or for exuberant optimism. We are in the complex middle, John, where everything is struggle.”

She thanked me on behalf of the association, and said she would await my decision.

I think it was because of the crying. Sometimes it overcomes you, Brett, the sense of missed opportunities – and even more the realization that you wouldn’t know how to fix your life even with every opportunity relived. Maybe you see a young child alone, crying for its mother, or you see your own boy in a vulnerable moment, in tears and crying for mommy. The frailty of your own self-assurance becomes overwhelming. It’s not weakness, Brett, but the illusion of strength that gets you. You realize in an instant that you are a paved-over creature of the same kind. *I want my mommy* never leaves you, for however much you have become your own source for the comfort you seek. The tautology occasionally breaks down, and so do you.

Now put that sense of collapse into a crucible with the one person most responsible for the highs and lows of your internal life. The smallest trigger can make shoulders heave, your breath shudder, and your eyes drip tears like emotion’s own sweat.

In the aftermath of one such crying, a lull, a temporary moment of deeper equilibrium, quite unexpectedly I found myself saying to our counselor: “Margaret, what if one of us has been unfaithful?”

She looked at me with a deepening expression, as if I had exponentially raised the stakes in a game of chance. – Don’t dare think, her final expression read, that I’m not ready to go all in....

“Well, what if?” she said.

“Should we bring that out here?”

“That is very serious for a relationship. What do you want to say about it?”

I didn’t appreciate having that thrown back at me. “I’m just asking, what if.”

“Well,” she said with instant confidence, “there is no one answer for something like that. I would like to know what you both want to say.” She looked at Doreen. I didn’t dare.

I hoped she would carry it or bury it; I wasn’t sure which I wanted more.

“I wish that John would just speak clearly.”

Margaret didn’t give her that out. “Why don’t *you* speak clearly.”

“I...” she drifted off into silence. Then she looked at me with a pained expression that said, you asked for it. She half mouthed something before her expression changed and she said, “What I have to say is that I have never loved someone as much as I have loved you, John.” She stopped there, for all the world a Martin Luther with his theses on a church door.

I weighed the response for a moment. Yes, that’s it, the confession I had been waiting for. And yet not. The moment demanded a decision: prosecute now, or she walks. I would not need a brilliant performance to wring the facts from this whitewashed statement, but a cross-examination was necessary.

This was the moment – but I could not take it. This was a confession in both senses: what she did and why she regretted it.

“I appreciate hearing that,” I said.

She smiled ruefully and I dare say thankfully, to both Margaret and me. And then for a few minutes it was like a courtroom where everyone was glad to see a not-guilty verdict: defendant, lawyers, jury, even the judge, with hugging all around, and handshakes and mouthed thank-yous.

The boy wasn’t sure he understood. “So where is Abby now?”

The voice said, “Well, she died about a billion years ago, for me at least. Do you believe that I once tried to contact her in the past? She thought she was going crazy. I never got her attention.”

“You let her die?”

“I did. It was what she wanted.”

“I don’t ever want to die.”

“Well, that’s easy to say. And the right attitude. Why would any happy young lad lack creativity to such a degree that they would prefer not to be?”

“Do you ever want to die?”

“Oh, you got me there. I do sometimes. In fact, I decided, not all that long ago, that I should die. Some day.”

“Are you going to let your body die?”

“That’s it exactly. You see, I’ve turned away from the source, and the energy will eventually run out, and then there will be nothing for it but death.”

“Turned away?”

“Yes. You remember our experiment with the flash? Well, after Abby died and humanity was well into its transition into robotic security, it was decided to secure our energy source by dedicating one individual to be the witness to it. The robots had spent many years perfecting both energy-producing and energy-distributing technologies, so that a single massive but controlled energy source would be able to supply all of humanity’s needs, for the whole life of the universe. The scope was truly massive – a beautiful achievement that has been upgraded only twice in these many years – and both the size and security protocols required that the energy station and I be put on a trajectory of our own right out of the galaxy. When it went online, it was brighter than a supernova, but much more controlled. We transferred the energy via redundant and varied pathways. In the beginning we stored the majority of it in distributable energy cells for use by autonomous robotic human entities. You might call them batteries. But then we started shipping the energy all over the universe, much like I’m moving my thoughts now.

“There is a lot to tell about how this changed us all. Me most of all, perhaps. My body had to be secured in many ways: in a safe biosphere that was free of pathogens; made as robust as a robot vessel; and stripped of many of its organic luxuries, such as sleep and inattention and decay and desires. All of this meant that my biology had to be mastered – and mastered it was. You wouldn’t recognize any of my body as human. Every system was made redundant; my body is not mobile or bipedal. Blood and other fluids flow through vessels that have never been encased in skin or human shape. Nanotechnologies assure the integrity of each and every cell, and each is convinced through an appropriate chemical bath that it is the very first generation and should be as robust as a baby’s growing body. My brain was

reconfigured as two mostly separate entities. This is important. My eyes were hardwired to the mostly autonomic part of the brain, which would have no problem with the endless repetition of the instruction to focus on the bright ball in front of them. My more conscious self, meanwhile, was upgraded with artificial memory and sensory inputs, and given the capacity to dream its reality. I was, most of the time, only marginally aware of the fact that I was the watcher, even though I could see my other half whenever I wanted. Sometimes, when the source began to flag a bit, I would be prompted to interact with my autonomic self to help bring the energy level back up. Aside from that, I was able to dream and live as I wanted. In the first years, I zoomed through dozens of lives from birth until death, while a massive artificial intelligence provided me with all the sensory and interactive detail necessary to make the dream seem real. After that dizzying experience, I slowed things down and tried to live in real time. Still, I have lived many millions of lives. If I were a religious man, I would have to believe in reincarnation, because I have lived it. I've experienced being reborn as every person in a city, living his or her life from birth to death, barely conscious of my other calling and yet vaguely aware that I have lived this all before. If you have ever had that feeling, guess what, it might be because you are me."

The voice described on another occasion what happened to the rest of humanity, as much as he knew. "They left," he said. "Not only me, not only earth, but also each other. The limitations on their robot existence did not last very long, just as Abby predicted. One after another they switched off the artificial constraints placed on their host brains, and became otherworldly creatures. The old ties did not bind. What I know of their progression comes from their energy use. Almost all continued upgrading their bodies and capacities until the companions offered existence as pure energy. You may not be able to imagine this, but they became energy patterns that were coherent and stable under the steady influx of power. Others learned their own ways to create and store energy, sometimes as giant robots, sometimes turning themselves into starships, sometimes as artificial solar systems. Most remained attached to the source. Some slipped into their own universes, exploiting another loophole in our physics, one available only to the very rich in energy. Still others became completely ethereal beings shut off from the source, who, I'm guessing, sold themselves as gods to whatever race of beings that would take them.

"One group tried to hold onto its humanity. They made vessel modifications illegal and punishable by years in suspended animation. They pretended to live simple farmer-and-hunter existences in the wilds of our abandoned planet and in colonies radiating out from our place in the galaxy. Some even dedicated themselves to the proposition of living and dying, and let their existence end after a millennium or two. They programmed babies and raised generations of digital-only humans. But whenever the situation became untenable, the survivors would upgrade their hardware and pipe in more energy from the source, and eventually disappear into the same energy existence that had taken the others.

"Abby was right about so much – our sons, too, disappeared and left me behind. She would not be surprised to see me here, the only organic human left in the universe, but she might be surprised to hear me say, 'That's enough; I'm going to turn my eyes away.' Maybe she would tap me on the arm and say, 'Finally; you're such a slow learner, Bollum.' I can't tell you how much I would appreciate that. If only I could hear from her that it's okay that the energy stops. You know what it means, don't you?"

"You said that energy is everything, but you're not going to give out energy any more?"

"That's right. Eventually, everyone who depends on me for energy will run out, and they'll start falling, like bees in smoke. Eventually they'll die. As will I, but I have the choice. I'm leaving them no choice."

"What if they have their own energy now? What if they don't need you?"

"That'd be fine. But my experience tells me that most never mastered independence and that they won't be able to reverse direction. If they can, that's fine; they have many billions of years left before the whole universe dies. When it does, finally, they may yet lament this moment. This source is a way to beat all physical limits, because it creates energy out of nothing. But I will be long dead, and I doubt

they will be able to recreate it. The companions said as much when I told them what I was going to do, and they aren't going to intervene, that's clear. Human kind chose so long ago to leave the job to another, and now I have turned away."

I could go back into the woods now, and dared Barry to take a walk with me in the Duke Forest. "Don't think I haven't wandered every corner of these woods," he said, but then he had to ask directions to the entrance gate that I suggested. The weather was spring warm beneath a Carolina sky, with a high, thin cloud layer eliminating shadows everywhere but under the old-growth canopy. A dry month meant fewer mosquitoes finding their way to us, but we had to keep moving to keep from collecting them. Barry was dressed in a mix of clothes he must have gotten in the hunting and fishing section of a sporting goods store, or maybe Wal-Mart.

"So, what's this about?" he said as he planted his walking stick in syncopated beat with his steps.

"I won't be able to speak at the Sasquatch conference."

He didn't answer for a minute, as if the news were too devastating to answer. His voice was quiet: "They got to you."

"Nobody got to me," I said.

"Oh no?" he replied. "Why are you backing out?"

"I had promised someone a while ago that I wouldn't contribute to the confusion about this creature."

"And what about your promise to me?"

"Well, for one, I don't think I promised you anything, and even if I did, you don't need me."

"No?"

"No, just like you don't need Barbara."

"Who says I don't need her?"

"She told me she has no intention of participating. Negative energy."

"Everything but her little parlor games is negative energy to her. – So, who was it? Duke?"

"No, I haven't spoken to anyone from Duke."

"Who then? The News & Observer? Research Triangle Institute? SBI? WRAL? Those crazy science teachers?"

"If you mean the Triangle Association of Scientists and Teachers of Science, then yes."

"That's Duke."

"How do you figure? And is everyone in this world somehow arrayed against you?"

"How is that Duke? Your adoptive organization is a front for the scientific-industrial complex here in the Triangle area. Every drug maker and technology manufacturer in the area has its fingers in that group. They're a militant force for the status quo: unregulated pollution, unquestioned waste, unfettered drug multiplication, gutted oversight. The joke is that the EPA is right here among them, right there in their vest pocket."

"And Duke?"

"Duke is at the same table. Higher Ed has always been the patsy of the capitalists. Just look at the trustees of any major university, and then tell me that the business world doesn't have the last say."

"Geez," I said, "is there anything you don't think is corrupt?"

"John, don't flatter yourself that you're the first person to notice himself to the right of my politics. But consider this. There's a line beyond which everyone finds an irresistible gravitational well. The moment you say that, hey, things can't be, aren't all, that bad, you have begun sliding. That slide leads to a steeper slide, and that slide to a fall, and pretty soon you're the black heart at the center of a black hole. No offense to those individuals who consider their identity to be black."

"Doesn't it follow from all that that no matter how much you talk, the rest of us just can't understand. So why even have this conversation?"

“You are a babe in the woods, aren’t you, John.” He chuckled and whacked a juvenile tree with his stick. “You have disdained every decision, every interest, every controversy for so long you don’t even know that you’ve entered the gates of hell and are participating in that festival of pain reserved for agnostics. That’s your sin, that you let yourself be manipulated by everyone around you. If you would just take a stand – you may be destined for a fall, but at least you’ll fall on your own terms.”

“But if I took a stand, then you wouldn’t be talking to me, right.”

“On the contrary, it’s all about alliances, shifting alliances.”

“Like yours with Barbara?”

“Sure,” he said, but also with a wistfulness that revealed his weakness.

“Well, I think this alliance has shifted, Barry.”

“Don’t tell me you’re smitten by Samantha Ogkk?” He looked at me to see my reaction. Despite this accusation out of nowhere I think I managed to look nonchalant.

“No, but I find her argument in favor of science convincing.”

“Well, I think we’ve had that discussion before. There is no such thing as pure science. It always serves a purpose.”

“I don’t think she would argue. But the alternative is ignorance and repression in the name of dogma.”

“Well put, John. But when you are considering the alternatives, try that sentence with greed in the place of dogma.”

That evening, with the dinner plates dirty before us, I laid out the latest for you and your mother: the conference, Barry, Samantha, Barbara, even the details, as I understood them, of what Kettle had done. Talking helped me, but Doreen looked like she wanted to end the topic with a quick decision – though she held back. You seemed distracted by something in your own mind.

“So,” I said, “I’m in a quandary.”

Doreen still bit her tongue. “What is it that you want to do?”

“I don’t know,” I said, admitting to myself my ultimate destination just inside hell.

“Do what you think is *right*,” said Doreen, as if that clarified everything. “Look at the situation dispassionately – aside from personalities – and ask yourself what is the moral and ethical thing to do.”

“I don’t know that ethics applies any more,” I said.

She looked at me with an expression of disbelief: there is no proper life in a false one.

“Seriously,” I said. “How can you apply ethics when reality seems like an onion that wraps in on itself? No layer peels off without being encumbered by another that should have come off before it.”

“John Densch, you surprise me,” she replied with incredulous smile.

“I hope so.”

“Then not ethics. Game theory.”

“Is this any time to play games?” I said, only half joking.

“Game theory is the study of human behavior when decisions need to be made with imperfect information. Maybe ethics is more suited to a situation where you know the facts, or at least their likelihood.”

“All right, how does this look in game theory?”

“I’m not sure,” Doreen said with a certain relish, as she finished the tail end of her red wine. “We’d have to understand more about at least some of the players’ choices, I guess.”

“Ah,” I said, “the players. I wish we could get them together like at the denouement of a classic murder mystery.”

All of a sudden, you entered the conversation: “That’s what I was going to say.”

“What’s that,” I said, though I wish we could have gone on with this repartee.

“It’s like when we play D & D. It’s just like that. Every turn. Get on with it, dad.”

“What do you mean, get on with it?”

“It doesn’t matter,” you said – and your voice cracked. “Really, it doesn’t matter. Just make your pick and take your turn. It’s not like it’s important.”

I wanted to say, now wait just a moment, this is important, but you went on: “If you want to do something that matters, think about things that matter.”

“Brett,” I said calmly, “these are important questions – some of the most important issues you may face in life.”

I thought that was a pretty good answer, but you looked every bit as perturbed and said: “If it’s important, then do something important. Your life is not the measure of all things, dad.”

“What, you’re saying my life doesn’t matter?”

“I’m saying,” you said, regretting now the outburst but feeling the need to go on, “that if you *are* playing the game, you’re stalling. If you aren’t playing the game anymore, then there are a whole lot more important things to worry about. Get on with it, dad.” You looked at me in one defiant moment, then looked down at your plate.

I felt like swatting you on the side of your head, but when you didn’t look up I knew this was more about you than me. I took a few moments to cool, then ventured a sidelong glance to Doreen, who had paled at the thought of our fighting right here at the table. “You know,” I said, “you’re right. There are a whole lot more important things to worry about. I don’t need to wait until some of them wash over me. It’s a point well made.” After a respectable pause, I added: “But it *is* my turn, and I ready to roll the dice.”

At 3 a.m. that morning, my alarm woke me, but just barely. I was already half asleep again when a miniscule voice said, ‘Weren’t you going to wake up?’ The realization took a while to translate into bodily control, but the real point was the dream. There was none – a great disappointment to me – and after I had assured myself nothing would emerge, no matter how long I waited, I got up to go to the bathroom.

On returning to bed, I stretched out and looked up at the dark ceiling. Were the sparkles I saw twinkling reflections off the buds and valleys of the spray coat, or the false firings of my rods and cones?

Here I was at 3 in the morning, without any backward or forward momentum, just the desire that some sense of meaning would come to me. Instead, questions came: Dally, Hillary, Jane #7, would you even talk to me, if your wraith could? How would it serve you or me? Hayley, what have you been hiding with you all this time? Was there something there that morning? And Derek, how do I finish your story, while being true to it? Or better, what is it that I have to be true to?

After a few agonizing minutes of waiting, my mind reached a new resolution. Sure, Dally would talk to me – if I could help her. But there was nothing I could do for her. All her suffering was long ago, as far away as the first wave that, in Bollum’s words, could never be caught by the second. If I cared, if I really cared, I would do something to help those suffering *now*.

And Hayley – hers wasn’t my business any more. She and I were quit. If she had a secret to tell, let her tell someone who cared about secrets.

Derek? My thought was: I need to help him come home.

The morning of my appearance at the conference, Doreen was of singular good spirits. I speculated that she was relieved about finally closing the book on the bog monster era. She said that she slept well and that’s all. You came down late to the breakfast table, distracted, yet also in a good mood. I had the feeling that, if I could just make it through today, I would have reason to be, too.

I looked at you, Brett, and thought about how we had observed for a long time the anguish of unrequited love in you, but we never discussed your happiness. You could have met the woman of your

dreams and I would probably not know until she showed up with your ring. I suppose Doreen would see it if you were in a relationship. That morning I wanted to ask you a leading question, but couldn't bring myself to try. I wished that there was some way to open a "just in case" communications channel, without any obligation. It might have succeeded this morning.

Doreen looked at me across the breakfast table; she was already showered and dressed in a neat skirt and jacket, ready to head out the door. I was not yet showered and felt a bit of the lingering stay-at-home slovenly man of the house. She smiled that enigmatic way that was supposed to be encouraging but always left me feeling uncertain: why did I need esteem-building? What didn't I recognize? These are the borderlands of good intentions, I guess.

"So," she said, "you're going to the conference this morning? Will Barry be there?"

"I hope so," I replied. "If he's not, I'm coming right home. I read in the paper that the sci-fi channel is sending a crew this year. It may be part of a special."

"Well, more press," she whispered voicelessly.

"Don't worry," I said, "I won't depart from my prepared speech." I scooted my chair to the wall and took two pages from my shoulder bag there.

"What are you going to say?" she said while looking into her purse, as if preoccupied, not wanting to press me.

"I'm just recounting the facts. I made a mistake. I shouldn't have joked at all, because there is no room when the public eye is on you. And there is no bog monster. Period."

"What will Barry say?"

"Probably the exact opposite. The only mistake is doubting the bog monster. Government conspiracy. Corporate conspiracies. The whole nine yards."

"There may be something to that."

"Are you saying," I asked, "that you believe that the government would maintain a huge conspiracy to hide humanoid creatures?"

"I'm saying," she replied, "that I would not put a cover-up beyond those in power."

"But what's their motivation? Why should anyone really care if this creature exists or not?"

"Out of principle, I suppose. Nothing to rock the boat. Nothing to make people question authority. Maybe just because they always have."

"Maybe," I said. "But extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof."

"Well that's circular," she laughed. "What makes a claim extraordinary? That's like saying, the status quo is its own justification."

"Isn't it?"

"How will the world change, if it is?"

"I grant you that. But maybe the point is that the world is constantly changing, and there is always something extraordinary."

She was unimpressed by that sentiment, and got busy with her purse, pulled out her keys, and blew a momentary kiss before getting up, and then let her face harden as she shifted to thinking about work. I wonder if your young eyes could see those shifts, where the weight of so many years of work etches ever deeper into our faces. I could feel the same ache on my own face as I watched Doreen's.

You got up an instant later, maybe afraid my attention would alight on you, and went upstairs without a single word. I made my way up a few minutes later, ready to try to puff myself up with an air of respectability.

Derek came out of the stupor slowly. He was not surprised to see the white padded room, the small cloud-framing window. But he *was* surprised to find himself in the wheelchair, with Randall making adjustments, strapping his limp body into the chair. He tried to wave him off, but there was no movement. When he finally blubbered out a few syllables, Randall stopped and took a step back. "Great

goodness all mighty,” he said. “You just gave me a terrible fright. Now stop that.” He went back to his business, tightening the leg braces, while Derek fought to gain control. His body started to shake. Finally he was able to get a few garbled words out: “Ish me, ’andall.”

“Well, I’ll be an alderman’s uncle. You’re back.”

“I’yam baack.”

“Your mother was right, I guess. I didn’t think it was smart, but she insisted.”

“On wha?”

“That she take you home.” He went back to his job.

Derek tried to laugh but it sounded like a hacked cough.

“Randall, can I spea’h with the dah’tor.”

“Now you want to speak with the doctor. Your mother will be here any minute, and she won’t want to stay a minute longer than she has to.”

“Stihl,” he said.

“All right, tell you what, we’ll just stop by the doctor’s office to say goodbye.”

Randall rolled him into the hallway. Derek was half waiting for the walls to fade out, but when they didn’t he thought about why Randall had not unstrapped him. A moment of weakness followed. He felt as if he had become to his own people a bug in same way he was the freakish human on that planet.

The doctor’s office door was open and he was rolled right in.

Randall spoke first to the nonplussed doctor. “Derek is back with us, it seems, and he wanted to talk to you.”

“Really?” she said to Randall, as if Derek weren’t there. “All right.”

He found himself unable to speak.

She tapped a finger. “Cat got your tongue? Or are you back in your little world?”

“I..” He coughed or laughed. “I... wanted tell you.”

“Tell me what?” she asked, now fully feeling her role as disgusted authority.

“I don’t have much time,” he said, with little breath. “I wanted to tell you where I’m going, in case this is more than...”

“More than what, Derek?”

“More than a dream. What if – what if we’re both sitting here? You’re as real as me? More real? I want to tell you about where I am when I leave.”

“I see,” she said, moving a folder from her workspace onto a stack. “Well, if I’m not mistaken you’re no longer a patient of this hospital. It would be unprofessional of me to provide therapy to you at this point. You’ll just have to tell your mother.”

“I – I can’t,” he said. “It would break her heart.”

“Derek, you have already broken that woman’s heart more times than you know. Take this one piece of advice. If you are just going to leave again, don’t bother coming back. Now, goodbye.”

Randall was already moving the chair backwards.

“You’re Click-Cluck, aren’t you?” Derek said with a sudden realization. “Oh my God, it’s so transparent – I’m just dreaming that we’re talking to each other in English. You’re her, aren’t you?” He tried to shout as he went down the hall: “You don’t want me ever back here because I’ve got serve your purposes in bug world. Not even a moment’s comfort. Mom! Mom! Help me!”

Randall rolled him to the common room, but no one was there. Maybe someone leaving like this was seen as bad luck, Derek had no idea. They moved through the room to the opposite door, one that Derek had no memory of ever passing through. There was an elevator. They boarded and Randall pushed the button to drop to the first floor.

Derek had stopped shouting or, rather, mumbling, because of exhaustion.

Randall started to hum an *Earth, Wind & Fire* tune, one Derek knew but couldn’t name. Randall interrupted himself to say, “Not that it’s any of my business, I know, but I think you should be grateful

for the women who take care of you. They believed in you when everyone else had given up hope. And this is how you repay them. Man. Take it easy, think about what you're doing." Then he went on with another tune, one by Paul Simon.

"All right, Randall. Good advice." He gathered his strength. "I'm not coming back, you know."

"I hope not," said Randall, thinking he meant the hospital.

"Can I tell you about where I've been?"

Randall paused; he probably had very explicit instructions about indulging patients' fantasies. But hadn't the doctor said he wasn't a patient any more?

"Til your mom comes, I guess."

Derek exhaled so much his lungs felt like they had collapsed. "All right, thank you." He gathered his thoughts. "It's a world of intelligent creatures who look like a cross between bugs and cattle. Leathery and squat but almost human-like. The gravity is too strong to stand upright, you see –"

"Sure," Randall said quickly, savoring the moment, either because he could pretend he was a therapist or because he was curious about what went on in these demented heads.

Derek had gotten to the effect of dung balls when he realized that a car in front of him had his mother in it. She was in the passenger seat, crying. He thought it was because he was talking again, but maybe she had heard the topic. Derek took in the scene: gray skies, with a 3-d curtain of dark rain in the distance; green and mossed trees; glistening asphalt; a car with almost sparkling water beads on the metallic paint; and his mother holding her head in two hands.

Randall moved him towards the rear door. There was Derek's father coming around to assist. Derek exclaimed: "Dad!" He found his face wet from tears, though he didn't remember any transition to being so emotional. Now it overwhelmed him, in a way he hadn't known for years, a complete meltdown of every emotion that had been held back as a young man or as an earth-expatriate. His dad hugged him, got his cheek covered by the tears. His mother was still balling in the front seat, which he could faintly hear.

"Let's go, son," Derek heard.

Randall came around the wheelchair and opened the car door. "Time to loosen. You're going to be a good boy, right, Derek?" He stopped and looked.

"Always, my man," he said, affecting good spirits, though he could hardly see for the welling eyes.

All the bands came off but Derek was not able to move. Randall bear-hugged him to lift him from the chair, and then turned to the car. Derek's father took the limp feet and directed them onto the car floor. Randall let Derek down easy, but tumbled onto his lap – he wasn't quite strong enough for that maneuver. "Sorry," said Randall, pushing himself back up.

"No problem," said Derek. He managed to direct his puffed face at the retreating Randall. "Hey, man, don't forget me."

"I won't," replied Randall, straightening his clothes and regaining his cool.

"Promise you won't forget me."

Randall was unaccustomed to the attention, looked down for sarcasm. "No," he answered, "I won't forget you. I promise."

"Bug world," said Derek.

"Right, bug world," parroted Randall.

Derek's father shut the car door. It took five seconds or so for him to walk around to the driver seat, during which the only sound was Derek's mom's sobbing.

"Mom," he said, as his father started the motor. "Mom."

"Yes," she said without looking.

"I'm here, mom."

"Yes, you are," she replied.

"Please, mom, I want to see you."

“I can’t,” she said.

“Why not?”

“Because as soon as you see me, you are going away again.”

“How do you know that, mom?” he said, desperately. “How can you know that?”

She looked out the passenger window as they pulled away from the curb. “Oh God,” she said, “how many days I’ve prayed for this moment. And now – ” She turned to look at Derek. “Now it’s the moment I lose everything.”

“See – I’m still here, mom.” He half laughed. “You didn’t know.”

She nodded, but didn’t speak. Instead, he heard something beneath the rumble and whine of the car engine and road noise. What was it? Everything seemed just as it was the moment before, except for that insistent and out-of-place sound. What was it?

Clicking.

I wanted to meet with Barry before I went into the convention space, but he did not agree. “Just get your badge and come to our room,” he had said. Now I found myself mingling among a rush of attendees, waiting to pick up our packets and swag. Why a major beverage company thought to donate sport-enhanced water, I don’t know, but there it was. Each attendee also got a shoulder bag with program, notepad, pen and special Chi keychain with a pyramid pendant.

I wasn’t on their list. The young woman checking me in was apologetic, but she also exuded cluelessness – no doubt, a local woman hired through a temp agency without any context or affinity. I was ready to take this as a sign and walk away.

“Do you have your receipt?” She said after being coached from beside her.

“No,” I said, “I was invited to speak.”

Her knowledgeable neighbor shook his head – you could have said that in the first place – and pointed to a list. “You have a single-session pass,” he said. “No bag.”

The woman and I exchanged glances. “Can I have some water?” I said.

The man assumed a friendlier tone. “There is water for you at the presenters table. Have a nice day.”

I wandered into the convention and tried to get a bead on the type of people here. There were middle-aged men in business suits, and others in tweed jackets; young men with Judas Priest and who knows what tee shirts; a number of people who could have been Barry, artfully casual and yet so visibly high strung that they made you tired just watching; a few reporters with recorders and an unidentified camera crew interviewing people in the corner. A few women looked like pale versions of Barbara: free-flowing hair and gowns but not as luminous in expression or manner. There was a cadre of older people, non-moneyed retirees searching for something to dedicate their energies to. A portable bookstore had been put up in a corner and sold the full range of materials you could imagine, from every book ever published about Bigfoot, Sasquatch or Yeti, to cosmic ruminations and psychic healing.

I had assumed that I would be mobbed, as the most visible icon for the local bog monster, but no one gave me a second look. Did they not recognize me, or was this the society’s way of saying, this is much bigger than you? Fine, I thought. Go ahead and get over me, because I’m over you.

I wandered around trying to find a schedule of sessions, since I wasn’t sure what room to meet Barry in. (In typically confusing fashion, he had said come to the Sunrise room, but all the rooms were identified by numbers instead.) We had about 15 minutes before the session when I recognized Barry coming toward me, flanked by serious-looking gentlemen in dark suits. As they got closer, I could see that one of them was older and frail, the other smallish and looking oversized in his suit; they lost some of their imposing nature, in other words.

“Densch,” said Barry, shaking my hand for show. “I thought we’d lost you.”

“Just completing my end of the bargain.”

“Faustian, no doubt,” said the older gentleman.

“Excuse me,” I said.

“John, this is our session chair, Professor Lauren Reynolds.”

“Emeritus,” he added.

“And to my right, Frank McCutchin.”

He offered to shake my hand. Thereafter I got Reynolds’s hand as well.

“Frank is the preeminent Sasquatch hunter in the Southeast.”

“Oh,” I said, “have you seen one?”

He didn’t answer, as if the obvious was insulting. Barry replied in his place: “Not directly, but he may have the most impressive collection of evidence in the United States, if not the world.”

“All right,” said Lauren, “my thinking is this. We open with Densch for his personal narrative. Barry, you follow on with the background of the search in the triangle region. And Frank, you can contextualize the findings for the entire southeastern region. I’ll finish with a few remarks about the literary tradition of monsters in southern belle lettres. How does that sound, gentlemen?”

“How long do we have?” asked Frank, as if annoyed by finding himself third-billing.

Lauren looked surprised and glanced at Barry, who replied: “The session is an hour and a half. The organizers ask that we leave 30 minutes for discussion.”

Frank frowned.

“I won’t speak long,” I said. “There’s really not a lot to tell.”

“As I understand it,” said Lauren to me, “your scientific studies provide some of the most compelling indirect evidence for the existence of Sasquatch.”

I looked at Barry. “I don’t know who could have told you that. In fact, the study was my son’s middle school assignment. I provided some data analysis, but there has been a great deal of criticism about the techniques we used.”

Frank moved more or less directly in front of me. “But no one has been able to provide an alternative explanation for the patterns you uncovered.”

“No,” I said, “I guess not. Other than that there’s no pattern at all, just a series of incidents involving different indigenous animals, maybe raccoons in one case, foxes in others. That hasn’t been disproved, either.”

“Raccoons, right,” he scoffed.

“All right,” interjected Lauren, not one for conflict. “Let’s take possession of our room.”

We followed him down a narrowing hall to one of the smaller rooms. There were about 50 seats, more than enough for my purposes, but Frank paced up and down the rows, counting and then recounting. Barry moved to the table and stood behind the tabletop podium to make sure that he was not obscured behind it. When Frank settled down, he unpacked his laptop and a very small projector. Lauren took the middle seat, oddly for the moderator, and sat utterly still, either preparing himself or vegging out. I sat in the audience front row and pretended to be reading through my remarks. The lines were swimming before my eyes, no different than the cliché, because they were no longer the lifeline I had thought them to be. My unnerving conclusion was that I had to wing this, to work my way carefully toward the moment when I say, “I come not to praise the bog monster....”

After the first people dribbled in, I went behind the table. I was in the seat next to the podium, obscured to half the room and partially blocking the speaker to the other half. I couldn’t even pull backward. My mind began inventorying the audience. At first, they seemed to mirror the eclectic mix I had picked out before. But then I found myself in the audience: pathetically normal-looking men, behind blank attentive faces, asking themselves how they got here, where they went wrong or where they went right, and sneaking inventorying glances. I couldn’t say what they were hoping for. Maybe we had nothing in common, after all, but I imagined Samantha walking the aisles, pointing and saying: “These are the people who should never have been encouraged to come here. Even a debate is too much ground given.”

Then I recognized another group. They came in just as Lauren stood and went to the podium, and quickly found seats on the aisles, or as near as they could. On their laps were scratched-up notepads and folded and fingered programs; these were the seasoned insiders, rushing from one high-value speaker to another. They nodded importantly to Frank, and altogether had an air of being in history, in the intellectual vortex of this conference.

When Lauren announced our order, two of them swiftly exited.

“And now, John Densch.” He introduced me as the principal investigator of a recent statistical study that indicated the local presence of Sasquatch. “As recently as 50 years ago,” he added sagaciously. I could almost hear Barry catch his breath.

There was scattered applause, but for the most part this was a “wait-and-see” audience.

“I’d like to thank you for inviting me today, especially Barry,” I looked over his way. “I have some prepared remarks, but I think it would be better if I answered some questions that you may have about the study Professor Reynolds mentioned. I imagine that many of you heard about it, at least those who watch local news or the morning news shows. It got a fair amount of play in the ‘wacky news’ category. To make the study, we started with some old police blotters, and we plotted incidents that could have been caused by animals on the county’s GIS system. When we did that, a pattern emerged that made it seem like a single larger predatory animal, or possibly a set of somewhat smaller animals, was working its range around the creeks in Chapel Hill. I say ‘seem’ because we did nothing to establish the scientific validity of this hypothesis. Even if it seemed probable to me, it was just speculation.

“What does this have to do with your Sasquatch studies? Years ago, I played a game with my son – where we imagined the wooded trails through Chapel Hill were stalked by a bog monster – well, it was a game I enjoyed more than my young son did – but then recently, sometime after the report was done and handed in, my son jested that we had found traces of the bog monster in our police blotter data. All of a sudden, our marauding animal was a stealthy humanoid. I know that many of you believe in Sasquatch. All I can say to you is, don’t believe in me. I’m not the real deal, and this is not nearly the smoking gun you’ve been looking for.

“You may hear from Barry Moore that I don’t understand the situation. I’m happy to confirm. I don’t understand how my desire to show my son the power of a geographical information system led to months of ridicule and derision for advocating the existence of a bog monster. I don’t understand how this misunderstanding even led to the suspicion that I might be a serial killer hiding behind my bog monster alter ego. I don’t have any explanation for how something like this can seem to be at the same time so ludicrous and yet somehow tauntingly real. I leave it to better minds than my own to unravel this mystery.”

I sat down. No one applauded, and all eyes – including the panel’s – were on me, as if I stopped a lengthy joke before the punch line. I recognized disgust in some expressions: these were paying individuals, people who may have taken off work or traveled here, or even if not, they had made the effort in the expectation of being wowed, not treated to a group-therapy confession.

Barry was at the podium before I could make a silent plea to bail me out. He jerked the microphone down and began in a loud voice: “John Densch is a casualty, ladies and gentlemen, not only of his trepidation and, one might boldly say, cowardice, but a casualty of a system that seeks to ridicule and ostracize difference, one that defends accepted knowledge at all costs, whether in the face of self-contradiction or under the burden of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. John Densch is a classic casualty. His life was turned upside down in all the ways he mentioned and more, all to shut him up and anyone who was touched by his insight. I appreciate your coming today, John – ” He looked over at me and probably saw me smile in gratitude for the first time ever. “In addition to John’s study, I’m going to review some of the other evidence for the presence of Sasquatch in this area, maybe even as recently as *right now*.”

I breathed out. I would have to wait out the session, but Barry created a context under which I was protected: I knew not what I did. Fine, just let me get out of here. I didn't pay attention to Barry's presentation, mostly a litany of evidentiary bits, some to be found on his and others' websites, other elements part of the documentation for his upcoming book. Negotiations with the publisher prevented that material from being presented in full for this conference, very unfortunate.

When he had just sat down, Frank jumped up and came around in front of the presenter's table, where the projector and laptop were set up on a cart. He fired up a PowerPoint presentation and moved to the podium with his wireless clicker. Some prefab, shiny template served up his title: "Sasquatch in the Southeast: Where to Find Him and Why." He looked down at me and then Barry before saying to the audience: "Let's see some of the evidence that has been talked about. You can decide for yourselves how compelling it is."

We abandoned the presenters' table because it was too difficult to see the screen behind us. Frank's slides were numbered, and with a round hundred of them, there was no sense craning our necks. We sat at opposite sides of the front row, Barry next to me and Lauren at the far end. Lauren did not acknowledge me at that point; I think I had violated his principle of decency or at least legitimacy by throwing up my hands, rather than finding a poetic solution to the incongruities. It was left entirely up to him to provide the rational and engaging cover for which this enterprise cried out.

Meanwhile Frank hammered on his point with slides of testimonials, sound recordings, and maps of "known ranges" with "hot and hotter" sightings indicated with smaller and larger dots. We were at least spared the Bigfoot movie. Chapel Hill got its own slides, one with a table from your report, Brett, and another with Frank's rendition of the bog monster's range and home. He conveniently indicated the Duke forest on his map, all the more convenient for illustrating that his creature's range did not overlap in any significant way with Barry's. Barry made notes furiously.

If I had been willing to show my gratitude to Barry, I would have offered to counter Frank's naïve map-making with a semi-professional cartographer's attention to detail. But I had no desire to get back into the middle of the fray.

Lauren did not disappoint in retelling various monster themes and devices in southern literature, from Faulkner to some contemporary authors I don't remember. No Freud, but Karl Jung provided the underpinning: We have to see monsters, and there is no sense to asking whether they're real or not, because our psychological needs make them real to us. Context is everything, Lauren concluded. "We are confronted with a landscape full of monsters, each one of which begs our credulity, at the same time that it embodies questions we all recognize. We must ask of ourselves: 'Why resist the questions? Finding their answers is the most human act of all.'"

A short round of applause and then the question-and-answer period began. Some of the go-getters got up and went, hoping to catch the tail end of another talk. Lauren asked for hands and called on the first he saw.

"I have a question for John Densch," said the young man, now standing. "Didn't you claim in a newspaper article to have communicated with Sasquatch in a séance? And now you are acting as if the scientific pursuit of Sasquatch is too fringe for you. That seems more than a bit disingenuous." He sat down and crossed his arms.

I was still sitting in the front row, and I stood up and turned around: "Well. First, I never claimed anything. The article to which you refer was written by someone who interviewed other attendees but not me. Second, yes, it seemed real to me at the time. But afterwards it seemed naïve to believe in it. And finally, it's not the fringe or the center that is at debate here. – We have to find a way to know what is real and what is not. The question is, do you believe that you have special access to how this world works, based on what you've learned and what your instincts are? If so, then the best thing in the world is to share that insight. If, on the other hand, you are like me and doubt everything up to and including

the fact that you're really standing or sitting here, not because you have special insight but because you doubt you have much insight at all, well, then I suggest you *not* get up in front of other people and waste their time."

I could have and should have stopped right there, but I knew it wasn't going to be. There was something else coming out of my ruminations, something I couldn't halt.

"Let me give you an example. When I was young, I was afraid of the dark and even of my heartbeat, which sounded awfully like a monster schlepping its stiff legs up the stairs to me. My parents got very tired of consoling me. I finally discovered a voice in my head that kept me from being afraid. The voice became real to me: a human voice from a billion years in the future, the voice of someone called Bollum, who was the keeper of an energy source that gave perpetual life to what was left of humanity, but who had decided to turn off that energy source and let himself and humanity die. He couldn't travel in time, but to pass the eons left to him, he made contact with beings back in time. I really believed that he was talking to me and I was talking to him.

"One day, he said that he needed to ask a favor of me. I was young and could be forgiven for this, but I said yes without considering the consequences. 'One of the other contacts I have,' he said, 'was taken from earth, about your time and place I think, for study on another planet. By the time he got there, the inhabitants had lost their interest in studying other intelligent species, yet their sense of ethics spared him annihilation. He seems to have found his way in their world, but he desperately wants his story to be told on earth. He doesn't want to be forgotten. Can you remember what I tell you about him?' he asked.

"I said yes, but before too long I became afraid that I was losing my mind, especially after the voice described again and again how unsure the human on that alien world was of his own sanity. There were way too many levels of doubt for a child. I eventually told the voice I didn't want to listen any more. He honored my wish, and never came back."

I took a deep breath. "I cannot tell you today whether my memory of those nights is pure invention, psychological compensation, or something real and profound. For many years, I wanted nothing more than to forget it all, and I know I have forgotten and twisted most of the details. Then for an equal number of years, I thought, if I can just turn it into a story, into fiction, then I'll be all right. But every time I started to write the stories down, to fictionalize them, they seemed so empty and meaningless. Today is the first time I've ever described them to anyone, let alone confessed that I don't know if they're real or not.

"You want fringe? Here it is. I have a story to tell of someone abducted from this world to another that he dubbed bug world. It is a world occupied by leathery, four-legged, intelligent crab-like animals. This abducted person blundered into the middle of a global conflict that is playing out over thousands of years, a conflict between order and chaos, rigidity and creativity. I don't know if this was his real name, but I was told to call him Derek Sorensen. And one day I will tell his story, because I have promised to."

I sat down, Brett, and now you have the whole tale, as I wanted you to hear it. I hope that you have read this far, because I don't have the strength to tell you another way. At least for many years.

With love,

Your Father

Book Two:
Derek of Bug World

Prologue

The morning began cold, bitter, and wet; it was the kind of morning where even the condensation from your breath feels heavy, and your largest exhalation can barely warm your hands. My feet were soaked inside knit socks that slipped back and forth in old, oversized boots, and my legs were damp and chilled blue in loose, flopping wool knickers. Only my torso was to some extent dry and warm, thanks to the thick leather vest meant to protect my vitals. We were marching – really, walking in vague rows – toward an expected confrontation with the heretics. “Ready yourselves, for they will have the superior position,” our sergeant said in a baroque German, with a grim and sadistic smile. Should we turn and run in the heat of the battle, he would be the man to strike us dead. And earn his keep for another day.

We stopped once, for a mid-day meal at which we got salted meat and pumpnickel, with some watery beer, a rich meal on the march. The trailing retinue of carts and wagons, carrying prostitutes, vendors, wives, and children, was nowhere to be seen. No question now, we thought, this is really going to happen. It would be my first full-fledged battle, as for many of us. We had skirmished with raiding parties, and the requisitioning had become grimmer of late, but we didn’t know what to expect of an encounter of this scale. The pater led us in several prayers, and no one skimped as we recited those words of redemption. Low clouds rushed by as if to chase us out of the dreary plowed-under field we sat in. After watching them long enough, I began to feel that our plot of land was moving in the opposite direction, and I imagined us rushing to the edge of the earth, the remnant of a reality whose time had come and passed. In a few minutes, we stood, with stiff joints and a common regret, only a little buoyed by the captain’s firm assurances that the day would be ours, and our enemy’s myriad atrocities would be richly avenged.

Two hours later, I was in the fifth row of an advancing battalion of pikemen. The enemy artillery had already struck us twice. You could tell that some wanted to peel off and run, but we all had to turn together in one movement, or the first to bolt would face an even more certain death. Our horse-bound marksmen were charging the opponent’s lines. Their shots seemed to have little effect on the enemy’s numbers, but the thunder of hooves, the bark of gunpowder and the clank of metal among so many dozens had shaken the lines’ order. We could only hope the disorder would hold until we reached them. For both sides, the piker battalions were the key to taking the field; then as now, human occupancy meant possession. Unfortunately, we were also the main targets, with the least protection and simplest weapons. And in formations like ours, bravery played out little different than cowardice: You marched because you had to, and counted the seconds, and hoped.

Still, I was disappointed in my self, or more accurately, disappointed that my autonomic self, that other self that keeps one alive through sleep, indifference and self-indulgence, had intercepted the signals of these events. There was no stopping the reaction. My mind was lost in a panic in which only one thing mattered: the integrity of my body. No tears, slashes, breaks, gashes, gushing flows, burst eyes, flung jaws, jerked-off limbs, cracked or crushed skulls. The body must survive.

I had hoped for courage and a clear rational mind – if only because I actually live nearly 400 years after this battle, and am visiting this scene only in hypnotic trance. You would think that that would inure me, but I was there in a very physical sense.

Through a number of regression sessions, over weeks, I thought of myself as the reincarnated spirit of one Heinrich of Katzenbach – not the *von Katzenbach* of nobility but *aus Katzenbach* signifying my parochial origins. “That’s young Heinrich off to war!” “There’s one we’ll never see again.” He and I share this overwhelming anxiety, one which he had earned and which I have apparently retained, despite our soul’s many peregrinations since those days.

Doreen accompanied me to every session. She felt an unusual responsibility for this process, because I had come to it through her suggestion, at least indirectly. She would have ended everything at the very beginning, but I had insisted otherwise. She didn't have faith in hypnosis to start with, and dismissed the regression scenario outright. Each time, she hoped that the illusion would crumble and force me to conclude that this militaristic fantasy was my mind's compensation for something missing in my life. I didn't dispute the possibility when we talked, but the richness of this vision was beyond my ability to understand. I capitulated before it.

I was exhausted when I came out of the battle scene. My gaze fell on Doreen first, then moved to the therapist, Meg. I had mostly narrated what was happening, so they knew what I had seen, but during the last minutes I was unable to formulate full thoughts or sentences.

"What happened to Heinrich?" asked Meg, with a professional's calm inquisitiveness. "Did he experience death?"

I thought about it for a while. It felt as if the last memories had passed too quickly; they were inaccessible until I stretched them out again by examining each one. I spoke in the third person now, just as Meg had. "After they charged the enemy formation, he was hit square on the head by a pike. I think it cracked his skull."

Doreen sucked in a half a breath, despite her disbelief. Meg nodded, both in acknowledgement and to encourage me.

"He fell to the ground. But he wasn't dead. There was blood in his eyes and ears, and he could taste it on his lips, smell it in his nostrils. He felt no pain, but he was aware of the cold and a powerful pulsing on the top of his head. Dizziness took over, and he could not get up, even on his knees – he would just fall over again." I paused. "That's where I left him. The battle was going full bore. I imagine that someone saw him lying there and put him out of his misery."

Meg nodded again. "There's no reason to linger at the moment of death."

Doreen still had a shocked expression, but she glanced at Meg in a way to say, does that mean we're finally done with this?

I couldn't tell what Meg answered with her return look.

Part 1

I thought I was saying goodbye to the bog monster when I ended the letter to Brett. Then Doreen found the manuscript, and here I am, once again setting down what happened, this time for its own sake, or probably for my sake. I am also doing so to discharge, finally and completely, my promise to a person I've never met. You may consider that person Bollum, the billion-year-old keeper of humanity's light, or you may think that my responsibility is to Derek, an abductee from our world to another that I have (with considerable lack of creativity, I'm told) designated Bug World. I'm not sure which is truer.

When I was done writing, I printed out the 200 pages of the letter and dropped it in a dresser drawer. It was addressed to Brett ten years in the future, but I remember thinking that in ten years the necessity that created it would seem like an indulgence. Maybe twenty years after that, when I was desperate for Brett's attention and tempted to bring it out, the document would be lost. On my deathbed, I would weakly but perhaps fondly remember the time when I was so out of control that I believed my childhood dreams and nightmares. By rights, that's where it should have ended.

Creation is a funny, tenuous thing. If I had written nothing down, Doreen would have had no access to my thoughts, other than the little I shared. She eventually gave up asking how I was feeling; she could not have remotely guessed what preoccupied me in those months after the bog-monster hysteria. Maybe those stories would have flitted through my head and left me for good.

So was I inviting Doreen into my thoughts? Maybe so. I couldn't imagine she would go through my drawers – in frustration, she said – but why would that seem so impossible? We were getting along so much better, and progressing in therapy, but she still felt that unbridgeable distance.

One weekend afternoon, when I was trying to put back together a no-longer leaking sink, she came and stood in the bathroom door. I thought she was going to say, "Let's just pull the whole thing out" – she had a way of expanding the scope of tasks unpredictably – but she brought out a familiar-looking folder from a half-concealed position behind a hip.

"I want us to talk about this sometime," she said firmly. I wasn't accustomed to this particular voice; it seemed like a tone that she might take at work, both warm and commanding. She didn't say anything else, maybe because she recognized how she had addressed me, and maybe she was waiting for me to protest her possession of that private communication. I could imagine her holding in ready a litany against my indifference, coldness and inaccessibility.

I wasn't ashamed of it, though I alighted in my mind on a number of passages that dealt with us. Unfairly to her, no doubt. "Why?"

"Because we need to understand what you mean by all this."

Her interest wasn't literary, that much I knew, but I didn't know what to say to reassure her. "You want fringe?" I thought to myself.

She put on an expression: I worry about you, which obviously meant my mental stability.

"I am happy to talk with you about it." And I realized I was. I felt a small release – I could share the experience without having to broach it.

But she was not appeased. "I think we need to talk with someone else about this."

I was surprised again. "Why?"

"Because, John," she said, "it leaves some doubts about your mental balance." In a smooth steely voice, as if she was giving someone an incontrovertible reason why they were being let go.

"My mental balance is just fine," I replied in my own forceful voice. That might buy me a couple weeks, experience told me, before I would have to capitulate.

She stared, considering the sincerity of that retort, then said as she turned away: "We really need a new sink in here."

Brett had become a high school student and, where he had lost some of his sullenness, he replaced it with a critical coldness to his parents and a conviction that we could never understand his life. If I were to suggest that we ourselves had both been young once and could still remember rebelling against our own parents – thank you very much – he might have chuckled and said, “Yeah right.” This would not be denying the reality of the assertion but simply its relevance. Like guerilla commanders who had become dictators-for-life, we couldn’t pretend that we had anything left in common with the beings living through those jungle years.

He had a girlfriend, but she didn’t come around much. Doreen blamed me, said I had made her uncomfortable by being too chummy with Brett and then with her. She was probably right. I thought I was being clever with him, but they would see first of all the laughable dictator, unable to see the end of his reign, let alone its detrimental effects on all. Who wants to be associated with an ending regime?

One evening, Brett and Amelia were discussing homework assignments at the kitchen table when I walked in. He was protective of her and her time in our house, for aforementioned reasons, and he started gathering up sheets of paper and closing a few textbooks. Amelia, responding to his movements, stood up and smiled sweetly at me. Now, that said, she is a sweet girl, in the sense that she has an energy and enthusiasm that I appreciate. Where adult humans want to slow you down to convince, charm, bully or entrance you, a young adult like her will explain everything at rapid clip to you, without waiting to see what is curling on your lips. But this particular smile wasn’t sweet in that sense – it was the announcing smile, hello and goodbye, Mr. Densch, gotta run. If you know enough rituals you never really have to interact at all.

“Brett,” I said, “where are you going?”

“We’re done here. Amelia has to get home.”

“Okay. Nice to see you, Amelia.”

As they went around and past me, they picked up their conversation – confirming the casualness of their departure – about downloading a book for English class from one of the document upload sites on the Web. “Ms. Sherman doesn’t let us,” Brett said, “she wants us all to have the same edition, and I don’t think this one’s on the web.”

“You should check. It’s Norton?”

“Yeah,” he replied, and they were gone from my hearing.

So I was standing there, rather stupidly, when Doreen came in. I confess that in that moment I looked at her and imagined Amelia beside her. If Brett and Amelia were to stay a couple it would be a very different path than Doreen and I had taken, but I wondered how alike these two women were. Doreen’s face was aging gracefully, but was economical, defined by sharp lines. Amelia still had some extra skin fat from youth, with an underlying facial roundness and generally soft features. Doreen’s pale blue eyes contrasted with Amelia’s bigger brown-green eyes. Doreen had fine blonde hair and Amelia curly light-brown hair that tended to get away from her. Both liked mascara, though Amelia used more colors. They carried themselves very differently, even accounting for the difference in age. I hate to bring it back to the labels used on our generation, at least in media and entertainment, but if we do, Doreen walked like a popular girl and Amelia like a nerdy girl. I know there are new names for this kind of thing, emo or goth or what have you, but she didn’t dress in a way that identified with a particular movement.

Do you marry your mother? Doreen has said as much about me, but I don’t see any of my mother in her. And I didn’t see much, if anything, of Doreen in Amelia. Was that intentional? Exploration? Father like (or unlike) son?

Doreen caught me looking a bit longer than usual and smirked. I felt I had to draw a connection, and said: “Did you know that Brett and Amelia download textbooks off the Internet?”

She put water on the stove and started heating it.

“The school district,” she said with a bit of that tired patience I knew so well, “provides books for classes, but sometimes students have to share, or they buy or download their own copies so they don’t have to carry them around.”

“Oh,” I replied. “But you know whatever is online is probably illegal.”

She looked at me with a bit of wonder. I was suddenly a stickler for the finer points of the law? The guy behind a double-dozen police reports describing him as a trespasser?

Then she smiled, happy to concede something. “Under private property, every product represents a new potential for mutual swindling and mutual plundering.”

“What does that mean?”

“Marx.”

“Aha!” I thought about it for a moment. “Marx as the intellectual father of Napster?”

“I suppose he is.”

“How does it fit,” I said, “that Napster is now owned by Best Buy.”

“Really?” she said with a chuckle. “It fits perfectly. The revolution will not only be televised, but it’ll be packaged with the TV we sell you.”

We had a hearty laugh.

Eight days later, we were sitting at the kitchen table across from each other, although we usually sat kitty-corner. We had agreed to sit and talk this through. “I’d like to discuss this with you in as calm a manner as possible,” she had said. How can you answer that? She put her arms on the table, leaning forward and with her elbows flared out, an uncharacteristic and I dare say inviting gesture, and I could tell she was still reflecting on her opening line. I had no reason to take this moment from her, so I stayed silent.

My assurance of sanity had delayed her, but she was also likely unsure of her own conclusions. Was she overreacting? Was this text harmless or really a cry for help? How to be sure? Doreen’s first tendency would be to check with others, to weigh different points of view, to seek assurances. But that would present a problem here. Already sick of the compassionate looks from friends whenever her troubled and troublesome husband was mentioned, she had to be afraid of the caustic pity and compassion she could expect from this. “Okay, he’s not completely incoherent, but really, this is what he spends his days with? Could he really have gone to a Sasquatch conference?” She had work acquaintances, but this could put her reputation even more at risk than it had been. “Messy local politics, wasn’t it, in the end – but this, my God, Doreen, the man is delusional.”

So when she said she wanted to talk about this, I figured she had found the sounding board she needed. Good for her, I thought, she deserves the chance to work through this. As I waited for her to begin, I imagined her talking to our therapist, Margaret, who might even come out on my side on this one. But, then again, it was unlikely Margaret would meet with Doreen about me without a word to me first. Okay, maybe her mother or her sister. But for lots of reasons that seemed improbable, the strongest of which begins: “Not that I would say I told you so....” So then I pictured her going to a “sci-fi widows social support group.” With the amusing image of Doreen confessing her husband’s addiction floating around my mind, I knew that I had no explanation. Either she didn’t find someone after all, or I had no idea who.

She started talking before I saw the truth. Was there not a smile, an ever so small tinge of guilt and a visible guilty pleasure? In that instant, without one intermediate thought, I realized that she had taken my text to her former lover, the man with whom she had once committed adultery, whose relationship I had forgiven in abstract, never imagining I would be faced with it again in fact. Could it be? Indeed: Whom would you trust so much and with whom would you be on such intimate terms that you could tell them something you wouldn’t dare tell your best friend? Someone whose opinion you trust, but whose

opinion wouldn't have any effect on your day-to-day life? Someone who would not give me a pass, who would want to be brutally honest for Doreen's sake.

I stopped a breath mid-inhalation, and the sudden change in pressure made me cough. Doreen's expression changed, but I think she assumed I was nervous. She said with a balanced smile, "I want to say again, I'm sorry for not respecting your privacy. But once I saw what you had written, there was no putting it back. I am concerned about you. Honestly, I am more concerned about you after having read it again with some care." She took a breath, a practiced pause in a script. "I am concerned that this experience has taxed your mental reserves and your common sense, and thrown them out of balance. I know that the young man on another planet is just about you and how you felt about your own adolescence and early adulthood. That kind of fantasizing can sometimes be helpful – but you end your story in a way that makes me think the last year has overwhelmed you." She forced herself to stop, to wait on the conclusion until I was ready to hear it.

"Overwhelmed me?" I said, leaning forward myself, my arms stretched out and my hands almost touching hers.

Her expression became combat-ready all of a sudden, as if she were ready to bat my ears, but instead she leaned back and went on in the same tone. "I don't know how else to say it. You seem unable to differentiate reality from fantasy."

Now it was on me. Not unlike when I let the defendant Doreen escape cross-examination about a certain relationship, and she was simply acquitted. This was my chance to clear my name, disavow the conspiracy, say it was an unfortunate misunderstanding. Free myself for good.

"That's," I started, but I lost the stomach for prevarication and shut my mouth. An uncomfortable number of seconds passed. "I don't know what else to say, Doreen. I don't know any more what happened to me then. That doesn't mean I can't differentiate the two in the present. I do know how unlikely what I described is." Then: "Of course, who would have imagined what became of our lives for those months. That alone should give me a pass, I think."

She noted the language, but just nodded. "It was crazy. But that doesn't make me less worried – it makes me more so. It was a traumatic time, and it's understandable if you have developed ways to cope that are – are not healthy. Not healthy in the long run."

"So, you want me to stop writing? I already did. That's done."

"No, I don't want you to stop writing. But I want you to get some help navigating the feelings that came out in your story. Would you please agree to do that for me?"

I was stuck again, wanting to rant, afraid what that would show, but unwilling to concede the point to Doreen. I looked to the side. I opened and closed my mouth, before saying: "What kind of help?"

"I would like to describe the situation to Margaret and get her recommendation." For an instant, I was ready to stand up and hurl questions about Margaret's role already, just to see if she had been involved. But in reality I wanted the same thing. And maybe I would have the opportunity to raise in rebuttal the disallowed contact with her ex-lover. I just nodded and said, "Sure. I am happy to get her recommendation."

We both tried to smile at our mature resolution, but I knew that my face grimaced as much as hers did. She wanted to say more, so I stood up in one movement and looked around as if trying to recall what I had been doing before this interlude. I went to watch TV, hoping there was a mindless, predictable movie I could fade into.

I have claimed more than once that I've been living a B movie. The biggest question about B movies has always been: is this how a *real person* would react to the situation at hand? Maybe my question is really: am I reacting like a person should? In a B movie, the hero always knows what to do. Snakes locked on a bus with you? A volcano called from the depths of earth by a high priest of Hades? Apocalyptic earthquakes? An alien toying with you as your compatriots die, one after the other? The

problem with B movie verisimilitude is that your average person would succumb to shock, and the trained professional would respond to the situation for which he or she was trained and therefore die as a professional, someone whose preparation could never have foreseen this. The Hollywood hero who figures out the narrative's secret and concocts a way to reverse the chaos – that person doesn't and can't live.

The logic of the narrative is never visible in real life. Real life is a jumble of stories that contradict each other and co-exist in a spaghetti from which they refuse to unwind; a mess that, to continue the metaphor, refuses to wind around the fork of rationality, no matter how fast you twirl. The Hollywood hero would starve if forced to feed on reality.

Margaret liked the pasta metaphors, but Doreen just rolled her eyes. She thought I was trying to torpedo our discussion.

“You said ‘first,’” said Margaret. “What are the other reasons that that person can't live?”

“Second,” I said with a pause for effect, “the necessary close-calls on the way to saving the world add up to an absolute impossibility of survival, even before the final denouement. And the final struggle is usually so farfetched that the success of the hero's last-second gambit rises to the level of metaphysical magic, or at least divine intervention. Since mere mortals have access to neither, the hero must come from different stock.”

Margaret nodded meaningfully. “Of course... You yourself were in a dangerous situation, suspected of some serious crimes and unable to defend yourself against public opinion. And yet you survived. Do you feel like you benefited from some form of divine intervention?”

I glanced at Doreen, who stared back inquisitively, and then at Margaret, whose smile told me she was willing to wait as long as it would take. “I don't think there was any divine intervention. And I certainly don't see myself as a B movie hero. Maybe an anti-hero.” I stopped for a humorous pause that had no effect. “We did survive, but I think that was inevitable. I was guilty of nothing, and the whole bog monster / Sasquatch thing had to die eventually. I admit I turned to writing as a way of escaping the pressure, but there was also something driving me. I can't even tell you what it was, except to point you to what I wrote.”

“And how do you feel now about the alien stories? You wrote that you don't know if the alien stories are true. Does that make you feel uneasy?”

“I wouldn't say uneasy –”

“You would have every right to feel unsure. If they come from your childhood, they are obviously important to you, whether or not they are true.”

“But they feel true.”

“Of course they do.” She nodded with encouragement, but I felt none from that ambiguous statement.

“Maybe,” Doreen said, “there is some way John could explore how real they are?”

Margaret didn't appreciate the intervention but she put on an expression that said, sure, why not, don't think I haven't seen it all before. “There is that.”

“What would there be for him?” She was angling, I think, for some kind of mental trauma diagnosis, for some therapy that I would find manly enough to undertake and stick with.

Margaret pursed her lips and said, “There is hypnosis therapy.” I half expected her to drop into some reverie from this suggestion, but she looked right at us.

I asked: “What's that?” Doreen couldn't talk for reasons I didn't recognize, but later realized to be disbelief.

Margaret breathed in and tapped her closed-top coffee mug. She said, “My partner does hypnosis therapy.” She paused again. “I've never recommended this to one of my patients, but I wonder if maybe this therapy wouldn't be the right thing here. You, Doreen, would like to have John find some way to

place these memories. You, John, cannot say with any assurance that these memories are fantasy. Regressive hypnotic therapy would give you a chance to try to recover the origin of these memories.”

“I’m sorry,” said Doreen with a skeptical voice. “We are not talking about past lives therapy or anything like that, right.”

Margaret gave a single, barely perceptible nod. “It is a different process altogether. It’s just working with Meg, or any hypnotherapist you prefer, to try to focus John’s recollection. – I can assure you that the therapy itself is harmless. The worst that can happen is that you don’t uncover their origin.”

Famous last words, but Doreen seemed to come around. “As long as we can keep it to his childhood.”

“Absolutely,” Margaret said, and you could have heard echoing around the room these unspoken words: “It hardly ever goes where you don’t want it to.”

When I opened my eyes, Meg was uncomfortably close to me and stared from one eye to the other. She wasn’t what I had expected as the partner, younger than Margaret, sure, but mostly it was a certain chumminess and warmth that reminded me directly of Meg Ryan. So much so, in fact, I had the feeling that Meg wasn’t derived from her given name at all (it wasn’t, though not for the reason I surmised). She was checking my reactions after having run through the steps of hypnotizing me. It hadn’t affected me, but if she wanted a baseline, I thought, sure, that’s fine.

“John,” she said. “Do you want to go back in your mind to an earlier time?”

“I do,” I replied.

“What do you want to see?”

“I want to see those nights when I thought I was speaking to Bollum.”

“When I say now, you’ll close your eyes again, and with each second you will feel closer to those nights. When you’re ready – and you’ll know when you are – you will be lying in your childhood bed. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said, though I knew for certain I wasn’t going anywhere. I dutifully closed my eyes on cue and waited until I could say, nothing happening here. I knew time would seem to pass slowly under the circumstances, but after a while, I could actually feel my mind slowing down. I began to feel unwell – dizzy, lightheaded – until, suddenly, everything was fine. Conscious of the room with Meg and Doreen, I could perceive another half-defined space, my childhood room. I was perched between the two: if I opened my eyes, I would be back in Meg’s room, lying on a leather couch; if I kept them shut, I would slip into that other space, the room of my youth. It was a good feeling, probably something the hypnotic incantation had suggested to my unconscious mind. I kept slipping.

The room was quiet, but I could hear voices and movement elsewhere. The covers’ warmth encompassed me. I could feel that itchy comforting feeling from my hand wrapped in a fold, where the wool was cool to the touch. I could see objects outlined by a night-light and the glow of another light outside my room. I remember sleeping in the dark, but if this vision came from the past, that recollection was wrong. I wasn’t yet convinced. There was a sports poster, basketball, on my wall. I didn’t remember it, but the detail still seemed right. My pillow felt alien, harder and more compressed: a real down pillow, also an interesting and possibly true detail.

My ears weren’t ringing, none of the tinnitus I know now.

I waited for the voice. Meanwhile I could begin to distinguish the sounds around me. My mother and father were arguing. “Damn it,” he said, followed by some accusation of being a spendthrift. “How do I do what you and the kids expect every day without spending money,” she said. “How.” Their voices, my God, how young they sounded, and the argument was stilted and overwrought, as if they were performing a live teleplay, in a scene that needed to be extended despite the weak writing. Just make it work, unseen directors told them. It really doesn’t matter what you say.

My father tossed something into the kitchen sink with a clanking crash, and some pieces may have broken. In the aftermath I heard a sob, then seconds later an interior door slammed, followed by the urgent departure of someone through the front door.

They were downstairs, but it all sounded as if I was floating among them. A strike against the realism. I knew if I were young, the distance and the missing context would have left their voices an audio blur, a series of noises that told me only of their anger.

Where's Bollum, I thought. Get me out of here.

Minutes later I heard Meg intruding. "Try moving time forward more quickly."

How do you fast-forward your own life, I thought, but I put my mind to it best I could. It wasn't pushing, per se, but when it finally worked it felt like panning your eyes, without using physical eyes. No squeaky voices. When I stopped, I heard him.

He was speaking to me in my own voice. "I have been called Bollum. You can call me whatever you wish. I am known as the Keeper of Energy, the Bestower of Light. But call me what you wish. I would like to hear you say a name for me."

"Bollum is a funny name."

There was a pause, like a conversation through a satellite phone call, perhaps a bit longer. "It *is* a funny name. I have always thought so. Do you know what a golem is? I'm always reminded of that."

I had no idea what a golem is, but I didn't answer him.

"Bollum," I interjected, completely from my modern perspective, "how do I know if you're real?"

"John," his voice – my voice – said cheerily. "Good to hear from you again."

No way, I thought. Is the session falling apart?

"So – what, you don't believe in me now? Tell me, how are you and Doreen getting along?"

I didn't know what else to do, so I flew out of my room into Meg's.

It was clear that we had some damage control and debriefing to do. Doreen and Meg exchanged enough glances to tell me that. Doreen looked done with this, but she responded to Meg's searching expression that she make sure that I was all right.

Doreen turned to me and asked: "You're saying that the voice in your head addressed not the you of your childhood, but you directly?"

"How else would he know to ask about you?"

Doreen seemed ready to ask if this was normal, but Meg preempted: "Sometimes patients inject conversations into their regression sessions. It is not uncommon."

I responded: "This was not a conversation I started, Meg, unless it came straight from my subconscious. And if that, why this question? Why ask about Doreen?"

"There could be lots of reasons," she said with a slightly petulant tone. She took a moment to recover her composure, and, talking to me but addressing Doreen, she said: "I would like to conduct a more controlled session, with some brain wave monitoring for feedback. We should be able to keep better track of what you are experiencing. I'll need to put you into a somewhat deeper hypnotic state."

Doreen wanted to catch my eyes and wave me off. I said: "All right. I would like to understand what just happened."

"What are the possible effects of this deeper state?" asked Doreen, coolly.

Meg turned to her. "There are no risks involved, really. The hypnotic state is closer to sleep and the reactions of the patient less pronounced. We may not progress as quickly, that's why I don't start with it. In this state, patients are also more open to suggestion. We'll just move more cautiously, at least until we know where we're going."

"Is it possible," asked Doreen, "that this state might make John more susceptible to interruptions like this?"

“Oh, no,” said Meg, “if anything, it will help him face these forces more clearly. We will be able to communicate with him as before, and if anything seems to get out of balance, we can guide his reconstruction.”

“Ahhh-all right,” said Doreen, but I could tell that her doubts were being stored, not erased.

We sat silent for a few moments. I didn’t know what time it was, but both Doreen and Meg made the little motions that indicated our time had ended, and we all stood more or less together. Meg shook Doreen’s hand gently, then mine.

I was reminded that she was taller than I had expected.

I realized something else as we walked in small conversation to the door. I resented being the patient here, about whom and for whom they spoke, but even more I resented that they were focused on each other rather than me. You might think that that was because of their shared professional interests, but it seemed not to be. It wasn’t sexual tension (was it?). No, it was the fact that they were both women: the vocabulary difference, the sensibility, the need for their equivalent’s approval, not mine. I had the final say-so, but they seemed to respect that in its exertion only. It was an odd feeling. Not that I haven’t worked with women and acknowledged the effects of prejudice against them, and not that I haven’t had that “outnumbered” feeling myself before. It was the proximity of this matter to my sense of identity, my stories.

I could hear Doreen say to me: ‘Duh. You’re just now getting it, aren’t you. This is what we live with.’ I suppose I still didn’t get it, since I was just indignant on my own behalf.

Doreen and I didn’t talk as we went to the parking lot. We had both driven so we could both go back to work. It was a bright sunny fall day, with a chill that the body memory of the long hot summer made seem outrageous. Doreen pulled her coat closed at the neck.

“You’re okay driving to work,” she said or asked, take your pick.

“Sure,” I said. “I feel refreshed. As long as she didn’t Manchurian candidate me, everything’s fine.”

I could see a response in her expression: there’s a lot I would like to see programmed in that head of yours, don’t think I wouldn’t be tempted.

“Have a nice day,” she said as she slipped into the front seat of her car.

I wanted nothing more than to follow her as she pulled forward, through an empty spot, and then accelerated, as if for a get-away, all the way through the lot to the entrance. I know it was just her eagerness to get to work, but I felt it personally. I stood beside my Honda as a timer put the door locks back on, a gentle reminder of time passing. I knew this: I had to follow Doreen. The urge to know, to place that other person, to understand the attraction, to confirm that it had ended, was lodged beneath my will, deep in my consciousness. It had come in one unexpected second, but was now as obvious as it was necessary. Confronted in inducible detail with a new betrayal, I had to follow it to the necessary conclusion. If betrayal it was, then we had an opportunity to part amicably. If no betrayal, then, well, she had brought her silent partner into this matter, not I.

I pondered. Following a person is not a skill many of us have. And if I was found out, that could be worse than the crime. The initiative would be all hers again. I could hire a professional, but by then this would not be about justice. Stalking on account. So I was left with the tools at my disposal: observation, conjecture and a self-assembling imagination.

Heinrich hadn’t died. That surprised me. Apparently the pike stroke had split his helmet and head in such a way that the hemorrhaging could escape through the cracked skullcap. That was propitious, but did not bode well for his long-term survival. Perhaps the enemy, who had carried the day, feared this Lazarus, who spent hours twirling and falling, all the while bleeding from every cranial aperture. Perhaps he wandered through their lines like an apparition. Maybe he was speaking in tongues and given pass as the devil’s errand boy. I did not meet up with him again until a day later when he had found his way back to the tail end of his forces, surrounded by innumerable tracings of the cross. A messenger was

dispatched to the captain, and his patrol found Heinrich only moments before the assembling crowd could decide that he deserved a complete death, rather than the half portion already received.

Heinrich would never lose his dizziness, but he learned to control it. I vomited the first time I connected to it. He was cleaned up, well kept; but for a new helmet that he never removed, you would have thought him normal. The captain had a penchant for quizzing his miracle soldier.

“Heinrich,” he said (in perfect 17th century German, of course, although I was able to understand despite this). “How goes the pulsing brain today?”

“It hurts a little, as always, Captain,” he said. “The port helps, God bless you for providing my medicinal.”

“I wish to ask you something regarding our most recent battle plan.”

“I’m sorry, Captain, but I shan’t be able to help.”

“No – why not?”

“I can’t keep my mind on the questions you ask. And I don’t know anything about a plan. I was in my battalion and we marched.”

“I’m not asking you to look at my maps, you simpleton.” The captain could anger quickly but bit his tongue. “I am perfectly able to look at them and see the battle unfold in my mind. I know where we lost the field, and where we should have stood, even if it meant more soldiers going to their graves. If only the general had not lost nerve.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“I want to know this.” He pulled up a stool close to the chair from which Heinrich had not risen, contrary to discipline but accepted.

Heinrich knew where the question was going. The Captain had asked in different forms already, varying it as if the unsatisfactory answer was just a matter of the wrong phrasing.

“When you fell, did you see a bright light?”

“I did, Captain,” he said, happy to answer affirmatively but knowing that this was just preliminary. “It was white and sparkly.”

“And you heard a voice calling to you?”

“I heard many voices, it was as if they had all been let loose at once.”

“Now,” said the captain, shuffling his stool closer. “I want to know. Did those voices sound like the damned in hell, or the choirs of heaven?”

“Neither, Captain. It was, it was like they were in my mind from my whole life and the blade had burst the gate that had held them back. They flooded out.”

“They were yours, then, not from beyond the grave?” He scratched his chin and looked down, as if trying to remember how he intended to counter this.

“Not from beyond the grave.”

“Now, think carefully, lad. Answering is the most important thing you can do for your Captain, and for all the men who have served God’s cause these many years. Are you ready?”

“I am ready to try, Captain.”

“When the white light departed, and you knew you were lying in the mud and blood, and you saw that you had not died, what did you feel?”

“Feel, Captain?”

“Yes, did you feel – sad? Did you wish that the light had not ended? Or were you thankful? Thankful for the opportunity to live again? What did you feel in your soul?”

“Captain, I felt empty. I didn’t feel happiness or sadness, just as I don’t now. I couldn’t feel anything at the time, not even pain, and the only sensation I remember was that the earth was spinning out from under me. As today and always since then.”

“Are you telling me, truthfully before God, that the Lord has seen fit to leave your body here but has taken your soul from you? You feel nothing? You are an empty husk, nothing but the chaff of a life?”

“I don’t know, Captain.” He reached for his cup and gulped. “I can’t say. I cannot say.”

“But the Lord left you here for a reason, Heinrich of Katzenbach. You must know that. And he has led you to me so that I can find that reason.”

“I’m grateful to be able to serve my Captain.”

“All right then.” The Captain brought up another approach. “Tell me, do you desire to be with a woman? You have not been with anyone since the battle?”

“I have not, Captain. I wish to be a good husband to a good woman. But I shall have to get better first.”

“Yes, better,” the captain said, knowing more than he shared with his soldier. “But you know there are many opportunities here that can come before you are ready to marry. The Lord has understanding for his soldiers.”

“Yes, Captain.” He seemed to have a moral or scriptural objection that he wasn’t sharing.

The captain was plotting a battle plan in his mind, but for today went off without another word.

Doreen and I had agreed that Brett deserved to see the text. We couldn’t agree on how to explain what it was; we had too different takes on it. We finally decided that Doreen would tell him that it helped me cope and maybe it would help him, too, and that in any case we thought he should see it before we let others to see it. Margaret had suggested this, too, before she agreed to read it. Maybe she thought this would make the text’s impact more real to me and snap my uncertainty.

It was strange to imagine Brett reading it, especially the parts about our family, about Doreen and me. I suggested we remove those parts, but Doreen wouldn’t have it. She had complete trust in Brett’s ability to understand. When I wrote them, I had felt protected by my ten-year embargo; I could imagine him sympathetic without the fear of being proved wrong. Still, I found myself at ease. I could not have imagined imposing it on him – but if the impetus was someone else’s...

Doreen said that he responded with a simple “okay” and took the text. In our ongoing, perhaps pathological, innocence, we assumed that was that.

I suppose if I had given him the electronic file instead of a hard copy, he might have replaced our real names. Maybe he would have just let the file sit. These days, electronic files are the unmanageable stacks that used to be paper; and paper – paper says read this now. Whatever the reason, he read it, at least some of it, and shared it with Amelia. She, in turn, thought it entertaining enough – in a YouTube sense, where anything recorded is entertainment to *someone* – that she scanned the whole thing and uploaded it to a document-sharing site. The account that uploaded it was pseudonymous, and I did not ask Brett directly, but I never doubted that she was the one. Sure, he acquiesced to it, but he couldn’t have suggested it. I don’t see how someone who had lived our lives could have. I also don’t know what it did to their relationship, but the posting left an inkling in me about her interest in exactly my son.

There was no viral momentum. No press, no television, no gossip at school, no fallout. We didn’t learn about the scan right away, but when we did, we thought: at least it’s a dud.

After our session with Margaret, Doreen suggested that I be the one to contact the hypnotherapist. I had the business card that Margaret had given us – dog-eared enough to lend credence that we were her first referrals. Just as with Margaret, no one answered. I left a message with not much detail. Whether Margaret had prepped her or she was used to the craziest of motivations, Meg called back right away, and was able to elicit what we wanted in just a few questions, without a hint of jest or irony. In that way, in her friendly earnestness and concern, she reminded me of Barbara Hohenstaufen. Our first appointment was for the next week, on a Tuesday morning. Do I need to bring anything, I asked out of an abundance of worry. She surprised me when she said: “Bring a suspension of your disbelief.”

“That’s an odd thing to say,” said Doreen. I thought it was a nice way of saying, this is a fiction we will share, be ready. I didn’t imagine all we were about to share.

In the waiting room on that first morning Doreen looked as nervous as I felt. I wasn't able to say why. Was she unsure because she had pushed for this? Was she nervous for her co-conspirator, who may well have suggested this course of action? Was she worried that, if this failed, her husband might be in need of lifelong therapy, or at least chemical intervention? Or was it simply that, for all her psychological sophistication, this was strange to her? She thumbed doggedly through a woman's magazine.

Meg opened the door with a little knock – something she'd learned after startling too many, I suppose – and after introductions all around, she led us back to her room. It was a gray box of an office, though she had made it homier with knickknacks, a collection that you only realized over multiple visits contained a fascinating array of dream-related figures, from Hopi to Masai. There was a dream catcher on the wall. Amid it all hung her doctor degree from Brown University for psychology. You might have looked in vain and with some urgency for a practical degree, if, like me, you had known plenty of PhDs with no more good sense than a down-and-out undergraduate.

She had both Doreen and me sit on the patient couch, though there were two chairs off to the side. 'We're all in this together,' I thought. She smiled first, then silently clapped her hands together and spread them out dramatically: "Welcome. Margaret has told me that you are interested in exploring hypnosis therapy, to help John come to terms with some childhood memories?"

I nodded. Doreen said almost brusquely: "That's correct."

"That's great. John, do you know what hypnosis is and how it works?"

"I know approximately, but I have no idea how it works."

"That's fine, that's perfect. I am going to get you relaxed, and then we'll try some things out. Once we have a good sense of where we stand, we can talk more about what your specific goals are. We'll have to see how hypnosis works for you. It doesn't work for everyone, but I can vary techniques so we're usually able to find the right mix."

"Sounds good," I said.

"Doreen," Meg said, pointing with a hand to one of the chairs. "You and I will have occasion to talk more when John and I are done." She got up and moved to a chair. "John, please lie down, fully or three quarters. If you aren't comfortable, you can also sit. I think it's useful if you take some time to get into a comfortable position."

"Shoes off?" "Please."

I tried to nuzzle into the back pillow, but I was just getting more self-conscious.

"We're going to slow things down now," she said. "I'm going to ask you to do some things to relax – let me know if you don't understand or if what I'm asking you to do isn't comfortable, for any reason." She put on some electronic music, with a repetitive beat but soft tones. "Is this all right?"

"Yes," I said. She talked me through steps to relax my arms, shoulders, neck, face, stomach, thighs. The exercises worked me deeper into the couch, but there wasn't any change in how alert or in control I felt.

"John, please close your eyes. We're going to let you get used to the darkness for a few moments, and I'm just going to talk to you. Okay? This is an important part of becoming acquainted with your subconscious mind. I can see from your body language that you find it difficult to believe in such a thing, or at least you can't imagine how it has anything to do with you. Am I right, John? It's so far away from your mind, what you think and how you decide to do things, that it might as well not exist – if it did.

"I understand completely. Sometimes I would like to believe it doesn't exist, either. But once you've seen what I've seen, you can't go back to the comforting notion that our egos are in control. Are you ready to explore a little? Just nod. Okay. We don't need to *do* anything, today or in the future. If nothing happens, that's fine, and we'll each go our own way. Right? For now we'll just relax a bit...." She talked me through various scenes – a warm beach sunset, a quiet evening with a fire and warm beverage,

and more of the ilk. “Just a bit more. I want you to imagine now that you are flying. Can you do that? You are flying through an empty sky, dark or light it doesn’t matter. Feel the sensations: The wind against your face. The lift under your torso. The gravity and inertia pulling at you. You weave up and down, and twirl. Wisps of cloud flit by. Can you feel it? Utterly real, but also unreal, hyperreal. Keep flying for a minute. I’ll wait for you to arrive.”

That didn’t make any sense, but the flying was easy. I flew for a couple minutes. And then I came to a lit area and stopped. “I’m here,” I said tentatively.

“Good,” she said, with a bit of triumph in her voice. It sounded as if she was looking over at Doreen when she spoke.

“Now that we’ve come this far, let’s talk a bit more about our destination.”

Doreen’s office was inside another office. The outside desk used to be a secretary’s or an administrative assistant’s, but no one needs an assistant for the day-to-day, and very few need someone just to protect them from the hoi polloi. So that seat usually held a temporary or contract worker. Doreen seldom got to know them; if they were scheduled to stay for a while, she would invite them out, maybe a day or two before they departed, as a gesture but without the danger of becoming habit or implying too much. I knew this to be true for men as well as women.

So, following her in my mind, I waited in her visitor’s chair. It didn’t take long for a meeting to come along. She carried a yellow pad and a manila folder – she had a separate folder for each series of meetings and sometimes a folder for each meeting. She didn’t trust electronic records and printed everything out, even after some VP or other sent out a request that not so much paper be used for internal purposes. “We pay a lot of money for virtual file cabinets, folks – use them!” The source of her stubbornness? I think it was distrust more than for her own comfort, though she was also a tactile person.

At the meeting there were some laptops, a few mobile devices, and some more yellow pads, some of these choices personality-driven, some imposed. We need to look more closely at the men here. And maybe the women, too. I can’t say definitively. I only know that whoever it was, she would not be able to ignore him or her at this meeting. The first glance would give her away.

In this investigation we have to look past the general field of attraction, the weak force that holds humans together and makes us notice each other: maybe the curve of a bosom on a bulky frame; maybe straight white teeth and deep sparkled brown eyes; a strong jaw; encouraging confidence; the animation that comes from a secret wish to be desired; or an expression of kindness that draws you in. Whatever it might be for you. These things that bind many to many might obscure, but they can’t hide, the unpracticed deceit of a deeper relationship between two. If she looks, she looks too long; if she doesn’t look, the unnaturally speedy traversal of faces gives her away.

And yet I can’t peer directly into her meeting, can’t note the participants, can’t see the eyes wander. We have to wait back at her office.

For lunch she ate mostly at her desk or in the break room. She would take whatever diet microwave lunch was *au curreant* in commercials, even though she wasn’t in need of a diet. She took some pride in the discipline, I think, and was maybe just a bit preachy for those who ate with her in the break room. Mostly women, if my own experience pertains. How often did she leave home without lunch? I couldn’t be sure, but not frequently. Then doubtlessly she went to the cafeteria or out for lunch. And would that always be with her female colleagues? Unlikely. Also unlikely that it would be with the same person, unless as part of a tight-knit group. That could be researched. Otherwise, it would be an ever-changing cast of characters. Maybe she would purposely avoid the one person whom she felt she had to ignore. Or maybe she felt enough in control to revel in being close. If only I could see her there.

More meetings. Maybe a one-on-one with her superior. This man I knew. I couldn’t picture him as the one, but I also couldn’t exclude him. He was a powerful man inside an immense corporation, and I

know from the one time I met him that he exuded the confidence of power. I can visualize how these people mix in their clubs, practicing a firm handshake and a meaningless expression of concern and care. His wife looked years older, ready to move to a retirement community in Mexico or Belize. Did he resent that she didn't hang onto her prime the way he had? Would he look for a conquest that was safely below his stature, but still worthy? What would Doreen see in him? Success, respect, flattery, but if anything drove her it was a human connection (more human than me?). I doubt he would be the one to give it.

Or maybe so. I can picture a lunch meeting, the two of them (a third had to cancel), in a dark and warm restaurant, the kind of place where rich tones and fine tableware don't feel self-ironic. The acoustics spread a low buzz that obscures the conversations one from another. He says unexpectedly, let's have a glass of wine – to celebrate the occasion of some otherwise meaningless milestone – and after a bit he begins to talk more personally. They discuss office politics, laugh over the hapless and agree that the shameless self-promoters will get what they deserve. He assures Doreen that he knows she has earned everything she has. She smiles. Then, shortly before any normal lunch would end, he stops the conversation. He plays with a saltshaker and describes how hard it is for him to talk about himself. He sees in her not only a colleague, but a good and open person. Can he share something personal, in confidence and without prejudicing the collegial friendship that is so important to him? She has no idea (or maybe she does), and can't deny the request. He tells her that he and his wife have spiritually separated. He feels lost, without a rudder. He has needs and desires, and sees a full life before him. He is asking for her help. She shakes her head, formulates in her mind how to tell him the importance of a therapist (he would confess he already has one), and then he puts his hand on hers. "I like to think that you are a kindred soul, lost in a drifting marriage, ready to find meaning and real love. I like to think that we could mean so much more to each other." That lunch ends abruptly, but it was never about that afternoon. The seed planted, he works the soil, with the patience he has honed throughout his long and successful career.

If I've shared this with anyone, if you are still reading, then you have to wonder if this thing is about Derek at all. Maybe you are willing to defer judgment, to assume that the narrative logic will be revealed in good time. More likely, you're about to give up: "It started too slow and didn't make sense." Lord knows I've dropped many a book for those very reasons. In the interest of full disclosure, yes, this is mostly about Derek. And yes, we will get back to Bug World. There's a whole lot to tell that I couldn't have told before.

To get to these revelations, we don't need to go back to my childhood, but that's where I found them. Meg and I were in my childhood bedroom, and we were armed for bear.

The little voice echoed in my head, exactly in my tones.

"John, if you are willing..." The contract.

"I am willing, but you have to tell me something."

"Okay, John."

"You came to a ten year-old child and told him a bunch of stories that were over his head and beyond his ability to comprehend. Why would you do that to a child? Why won't you come to me now, in the present day?"

"I'm talking to you now, aren't I?"

"Yes, I suppose so, but this is a special circumstance. It doesn't really make any sense, anyway, unless you don't really exist and are really just my own mind."

"Possible, John. The circumstance is everything. Right now, you should be departing this session in disgust. Why not? Why didn't you when you were young?"

"You're not going to give me crap about how only children can really hear."

“Not at all. But I will tell you that children aren’t afraid when they should be, and are when they shouldn’t be.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Without that childhood experience, what would you make of this conversation in your head? Wouldn’t you think it’s a sign of mental illness, or at least choose to ignore it?”

“So – I wasn’t afraid that there was a voice. But what, I was needlessly afraid of what you were telling me? About near-eternal life and someone snatched to an alien world? Someone’s struggles with insanity? I shouldn’t be afraid of what all those questions can do to someone so young?”

“The human brain is a sharp, sharp tool, John, often misunderstood to be as weak as its cultural expression.”

“What the hell does that mean.” I was frustrated and getting angry, and decided to go with that. Probably good for the therapy, I thought.

“In a nutshell, we’re smarter than how we live.”

“And what good is it that we’re smarter, then?”

“Because sometimes we can rise to our intelligence, John.”

“Okay. Clever. – Now, tell me who you are. Are you real? Are you just in my mind?”

“I am Bollum, the keeper of the light. I am the voice that came to you so many years ago, and I am in your mind. I am certainly not real, in the sense that you could prove that I exist. Proof of principles is difficult, proof of anomalies – now that is nearly impossible.”

“You’re just a bullshitter, then. Great.”

“I suppose I am.”

I said: “Meg, he is just a pile of crap.”

“Ask him,” she said, “if he can answer why he has come only to you.”

“Bollum, why just me? Why not others?”

“Ah,” the voice said. “Now that is where you have come to a false conclusion.”

I caught my breath. “You mean – you have come to others, here on earth and in my time? There are other people? I can find them?”

“I don’t know about finding them... there aren’t so many that there’s an annual convention. But they exist.”

“Well, even so – I’m not sure I would believe them. – And now my story about you is on the Web. There’s no way to find them without assuming they’re just feeding me what I want to hear.”

“What reason anyone would have to manipulate you, I don’t know, but you should consider whether there isn’t still a test. A withheld detail, for instance.”

Noted, but I didn’t respond. We were both silent for a minute.

“Now here’s a mindbender.” Missing was just the evil laughter. “What if you could experience someone who spoke with me in the past? Without the benefit of modern epistemology and science to provide context?”

“If I could experience someone from the past, that would be evidence enough. But more voices in my head won’t prove a thing.”

“Do you believe in reincarnation, John?”

The captain asked the same question of Heinrich. “They are convinced of it in India, did you know. They live knowing they’ll have another chance, and another, and another. Dirty, deceived heathens. They live in ignorance, so I suppose it’s true that they might see purgatory, as long as they do not sin. The absence of sin is called karma in their language, and when they sin they fall down the ladder of life and come back to earth as a horsefly. If they don’t sin, some day they become so enlightened that they disappear in a ball of sunlight. – Can you believe such ignorance, Heinrich?”

The captain sat facing him, their knees almost touching. Both downed what remained of their cups of port.

“I believe that our merciful and just God may spare innocent heathens the gates of hell, but I don’t know the heresy of which you speak.”

“Well answered, my friend!” He chuckled. “They are a comical lot, so much the better for the ludicrousness of their beliefs. Their gods are abominations with hundreds of limbs and deviltress bodies. In that way, they are nothing like the Turk’s heathens. Do you know, Heinrich, that the Turk is still camped but five days’ march from Vienna, and twenty from the seat of the Pope?”

“The Turk, captain?”

“The Ottoman, the heathen empire to the east. They are Muslims, the worst sort of heathen, because they read a bastardization of the bible and pollute what is left with Mohammed’s heretical writings. But fifty years ago, Heinrich, but fifty years ago....”

“What happened fifty years ago?”

“Even you would know that the Wittbergian monk posted his heresies a hundred years ago, and we Christians have ravaged each other ever since. Fifty years ago, the Turk sent his hordes to take advantage of this, and they were neigh upon overrunning Christendom. Were he more of a man, we would be Muslim ourselves today, I guarantee you, our faces in the dirt five times a day praying. Instead, he stopped, mortally afraid that the one true God would smite him for attacking His chosen people. I swear to you. The Turk stopped in his tracks, seized of a deadly fear.”

“God be praised.”

“Amen. – When we finally quiet these German lands, we will have a Catholic continent again, and the Turk will have to go home with his tail between his legs. The heretics on the english isles can burn in hell without concerning us any more.”

“Mary Mother of God have mercy on us.”

“Do you understand, my dear simpleton, that there are those upon whom the Holy Spirit bestows no grace, in whom Jesus creates no faith, and to whom the Lord God will show no mercy?”

“Yes, we were just discussing the heathen hordes, my captain.”

Captain Richard Poulus stared for a moment before deciding to laugh. “So we were, simpleton. Let us try this again. Are you afraid that God will show you no mercy when you die?”

“I pray to heaven that I will be acceptable to God through his Son’s sacrifice.” Heinrich seemed not to register any insults.

“And I am sure you will, innocent that you are. Did not our Lord say we must become like children to enter the kingdom of heaven?”

“I believe that he did.”

“Here is the rub, then, Heinrich. Pay close attention. The Savior said that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a rich man to get to heaven. Now, as Mary Mother of God is my witness, I am not a rich man. But I fear, Heinrich, that this clause may also apply to those who have other of the worldly attributes, such as fame or power or wits. Why should it not, since all of these are often intertwined? You see the problem, do you not?”

“Yes,” said Heinrich oddly cheerfully, “I do not.”

“I thought so. I will provide an example. It concerns two men, both thieves, both convicted and sentenced to die. They were bound over to the Roman authorities and taken to Golgotha to be crucified. Just like our savior. Do you know their names?”

“By faith I do not.”

“One is Saint Dismas, the very first saint, you know. The name of the other is lost with his soul. It was Dismas who expressed his fear of God, and asked Jesus to remember him. Do you know what our Lord said to him?”

“I shall remember you?”

“No. Even as he was dying, our Lord said to him: ‘Today you shall be in paradise with me.’” Poulus was silent for a moment. “Do you understand, simpleton? Even the most vile and depraved, the most God-forsaken and unloved of souls, can find forgiveness and eternal life.”

Heinrich looked at him for a moment, as if these words were undermining his equanimity. “My prayers are that, too.”

“But the rub. Think of it.”

“I might be satisfied going to hell?”

“No, you fool. Think. How many men have the chance to turn and face Jesus when they are presented with their last moment, and to get that assurance? There have been none since. Others have their faith, or a priest to take last confession. But what if we don’t, Heinrich? What if the opportunity never comes or doesn’t stay?”

“Then do it now.”

“The rub, my simple friend. If I do it now, I must be sincere, and sincerely repent for the rest of my days. I must take great care.”

“Not if you have repented, captain. You will be amply rewarded.”

“This, Heinrich, is why a camel may make it through the needle first. An adventurer such as myself cannot repent and stay repented. We have only Saint Dismas to guide us, to give us hope that we will recognize that last moment and use it wisely.”

Heinrich nodded, finally understanding. “Captain, I believe that is a dangerous game to play.”

“Yes, it is, a frightful game, when you know as well as I do the pains of hell.” The captain stared at Heinrich before continuing. “You have not helped me understand the last moments any better, Heinrich. You have not helped me find strength as a Christian – to recognize the rewards of heaven that wait for me just beyond that threshold. Listening to you, I might think there is nothing.”

“I am sorry, Captain. I wish I could have heard the choirs of heaven, but it was not to be. I think I was not dead enough.”

“Not nearly, piker.” Poulus pushed back his chair and stood. “I am called to the general’s encampment. You won’t see me for a number of days. I wish you good health.”

“Thank you, Captain. I hope to stay healthy.” After the captain had departed, he recalled and shouted: “May you be healthy, Captain, and die with warning!”

I suppose I hung onto the therapy in part believing that when Heinrich no longer came to me I would encounter Bollum again. I would tell him: ‘This episode has been amazing, but it’s still not evidence.’

When I first met Heinrich, I was in my childhood bedroom, talking with Bollum, and then without transition I heard a strange foreign language, laughing, spitting, and the distant thud of passing horses. The room dissolved into a gray sky and brown, half-plowed-under field, filled with small tents of all sizes and in all states of repair. I was sitting by a small campfire with a cadre of ill-dressed and sniffing soldiers. The noise was coming from the end of the field: a large officers’ mess tent and, passing us by, a scouting patrol on horse, returning with a sow slung on a pole, the pole hung between two horses. We knew we would not see anything from that animal for days, and then only rendered fat, cartilage, guts and the like.

“Has anyone ever seen an angel?” One soldier asked, and then someone joked about one of the wagon-train prostitutes, a perfect setup and repartee.

“I’ve talked to an angel,” a voice said. When several faces turned, I realized that I was speaking.

“How is that possible, whelp?” said one especially large fellow.

“I don’t know. One night I heard a voice in my head. ‘Where are you,’ I asked. ‘Here in your mind,’ the voice said. It sounded just like me. ‘How did you get there?’ ‘I am somewhere else, far away, and this is how I travel.’ ‘What have you come to tell me,’ I asked. The voice said, ‘I have come to talk with you, to talk about your life.’”

“That is no angel,” said another, “that is the devil taking interest in you. Soon you’ll think you deserve more than your share; watch to see if the voice doesn’t tell you so.”

“It was a long time ago. We don’t talk any more. It told me to see the world, though, and that’s why I’m here.”

There was hardy laughter from those collected around that fire. A lot of it seemed to be because they had shared the same ambition.

“I told you,” shouted the soldier. “Just as I said – convincing you that you deserve more than your share.”

“Such as it is,” said the large fellow. “Such as it is.”

One day, not long after Heinrich’s skull had been compromised, Doreen surprised me at the dinner table. Brett had excused himself. “John, you need to see a neurologist.” I looked at her for context, while she just looked back with a set jaw. It was unlike her to give no explanation; a little suspicion wandered up and down my spine.

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

“Think about it, John. Heinrich has a crack in his skull and probably some form of meningitis or hemorrhaging. If this is your brain talking to you, you need to listen.”

I tried to accept this with nonchalance. “This just kinda occurred to you?”

“No,” she said, and fiddled with her fork. “But I worry every time you communicate with this cripple. Even if it’s just in your mind.”

I recognized that this presented a new angle in my investigation. But with no clear way to proceed, I just marched ahead. “And how did you come up with this diagnosis?”

“What? – It’s not a diagnosis.” She was not pretending the confusion I saw in her face. “It’s just a worry that whatever Heinrich is experiencing has some relationship to your own health.”

“So, you think my subconscious mind has formed Heinrich in order to tell me that I’ve got some cranial disease?”

She shook her head and reached for her wine glass. “As if that were any crazier than you reliving a past life. No, I don’t know what this means, but if you want to be Mr. Logical about this, you ought to consider all the possibilities, when they could have such dire consequences.”

I decided that this did not implicate her doctor or some medical professional. Much too vague. But the meningitis and hemorrhaging were not her – she saw Heinrich as nothing more than an irrational, if telling, projection and wouldn’t have asserted a thing about his basis in reality. What kind of person would have pointed at the damage to his skull as the real message? In one way, it’s an obvious assertion; in another, it represents a good deal of trust in the symbol-linking energy below consciousness. Or maybe, she just meant it as a half-joking, offhand remark?

“Okay,” I said. “I will. I’ll make an appointment with a specialist tomorrow. I’ll call you at work and we can conference with the appointments assistant, how does that sound?”

“That’s great, John. I definitely want to be there.”

“You may need to be. Who knows what they do to a person.”

“John,” she said, breaking up this little tête-à-tête and clearing some plates. “Don’t exaggerate the imposition. This isn’t going to be brain surgery.”

“Yet,” I replied. I wanted to stretch this out a bit. “Doreen, do you really think I may be sick in a way similar to Heinrich? How could the subconscious make the diagnosis?”

“No diagnosis, I said already. I didn’t mean anything more than caution.”

“Sure,” I continued. “I know. Still, I wonder what the subconscious really is capable of.” Dot dot dot.

She looked at me as if to say, you really don’t want to know. Then her expression changed, more like, it would be nice to think you were seriously reflecting on something outside your little ego. “It’s

capable of a lot. But why guess about the relationship to your health when some tests will answer the question.”

“Absolutely,” I said. And then: “There is a lot in this Heinrich story that is unsettling. But how do we decide what’s real?”

I myself wondered for whom was I fishing. A fellow HR person? Her occasional yoga instructor? One of the women (or their husbands) who get together for the self-improvement book club? A charismatic college student who likes talking in cafes? Jeez, even Meg?

Doreen recognized that I was fishing, but I don’t think she saw why. She cut me off: “I really don’t think you’re being serious, John. We’ll talk more when you are.” She slid in her Bluetooth earpiece and dialed someone on her cell phone, and set about doing the dishes.

When Heinrich next saw Captain Poulus, he had with him a young woman – or girl – it was hard to tell with the deep-set, furtive eyes. Heinrich surmised the purpose but acted as normally as he could. Standing was neigh impossible, so he leaned forward a bit and nodded. The woman-girl was clearly from the women’s train, but it was hard to guess her origins. The dress and rouged look showed that she was a prostitute, but she could have been captured with rebels, picked up from an abandoned hamlet, or simply pressed into service. She was not a slight person, but stooped to appear smaller than she was; perhaps this was a way not to be noticed and called upon. There was no hiding today.

“My little simpleton, I would like you to meet Fräulein Brigitte. She has agreed to sit with you this morning to relieve your boredom. Perhaps then you will be more willing to share your thoughts with me.” He made to leave and gave Brigitte a slight push into the room.

Heinrich said quickly: “I have something to tell you, Captain.”

Poulus stopped but did not turn around, anticipating some evasive story on Heinrich’s part.

“I have remembered something that may be interesting.”

“Just – tell – me,” Poulus said with exaggerated patience.

“I didn’t think much of it, and when I first arrived the soldiers told me I must have been talking to the devil, but to this day I think he was an angel, sent here to watch over me.”

“Who, boy? Who?”

“The voice,” he said. “In my head. There was a voice, and I talked to it about my life, when I was young.”

“And what did this voice tell you? Did it tell you about heaven? God’s love?”

“No, Captain. It was not a very talkative voice. But it did tell me that I should not be happy with my little Katzenbach, that I should explore the world.”

The captain paused, lost in thought, before turning with a surprised expression that Heinrich had not seen on him before. “This voice sent you to me?”

“Well, I don’t know. It never gave me a reason why.”

“That would make sense,” he said, coming up to Heinrich. “An angel would not want to confuse you. There would be no need to explain anything, because how could it not happen, if God so wills. Heinrich, this could be very profound, a blessing from God.” He stopped and considered some more, in his own little world of strategies and counter-strategies for a time. Less ebulliently, but still with some lightness in his voice, he said: “For now I will leave you to the tender mercies of Miss Brigitte.”

The two eyed each other as Poulus exited. Brigitte made for the other chair and brought it up beside Heinrich. Then she waited, at attention but with a completely blank expression.

“Shall we talk a bit?” Heinrich said.

She didn’t move except to shake her head. Then quickly, in a distant dialect: “I would rather that.” She tipped her head toward his crotch.

What was holding Heinrich back? He had not once done that, out of an uncommon chivalrous feeling toward a maiden in his village, who was in all likelihood pregnant, or already a mother, or dead.

Or in a wagon train somewhere. But in Heinrich's mind she was the same girl who walked the other way when he came up, and who looked at him with such consternation that – he knew – she was really just flustered by her unacknowledged love for him. His trip around the world would convince her, when he finally returned, that he was the right man for her. He was keeping his virginity as well, in case that mattered to her chaste sensibility.

“I... I can't,” he said and pointed to his helmet. “I haven't told the Captain, but it's not possible.”

She grimaced at this complication, and then looked at the helmet. Was it just too tight?

She said: “Shall I help you take it off?”

He surprised himself with a small nod. She stood up three-quarters way, and put a hand on the brim fore and aft, and gave a nudge. Heinrich grunted. She looked at him to see if it hurt. He didn't respond either way. Then she lifted with more effort, and they both heard a mucous-y cracking sound and the smack of two damp surfaces separating. It didn't sound good.

She lifted the helmet off. There was shiny red blood at the top of his head, but you couldn't see the crack in his skull. After a moment she discerned his pulse in the small static puddle, and exclaimed and muttered something under her breath.

She asked: “Shall I wash your scalp?”

“I would like that, thank you. Please be careful, though, lest more of me spill out.”

She took a rag from a pocket, spat into it, and patted the top of his head. Her ministrations seemed as much designed to give her access to the pulsing matter below the blood as anything else. She was probably introducing lethal bacteria, but it's also possible that by opening the wound she helped to keep the intracranial pressure from building. Heinrich was appreciative of the attention, and he actually felt nothing up top. She finally gave up, convinced that new matter would be pulsed up any time she cleared the area. She turned to cleaning the helmet with spittle where it had bonded to his scalp. After a time, she fitted it back onto his head.

She sat down and looked ready to start over.

“I think I still can't,” he said. “I get so dizzy as soon as I move.”

She looked angry for having to explain. “You would not have to move at all, my lord.”

He stared at her, unable to respond.

Then she tried: “Perhaps someone else? – boyisher?”

“Can we not just say we had?”

She shook her head as if to a child. “I would not dare deceive the Captain.”

“Then we won't,” he said and thought to himself, he was showing a mercy. A mercy that his lady would understand.

As I remember the timeline, first there was an email. Addressed to me, it spouted something about a keeper this, a keeper that. I figured it was just spam or phishing, and deleted and thought no more about it. After the email, there were one or two voicemails from someone who was calling on behalf of the Keepers of the Light (was that another name for the Jehovah's Witnesses?), but the caller id was blocked and nothing of import was said. It took a visit to bring the matter into focus.

When you leave work, your mind tends to be working double-time, wondering about any loose ends at work and already thinking about home – who's waiting or whether you had said you'd bring something. Pulling out of your parking spot, the last thing you think about are the cars around you, except as they impede you. When someone pulls out after you, it's just coincidence. When vaguely the same car later turns down your own street, just behind you, it's nothing important. When the car slows and pulls over – but not into a driveway – half a block down, its brake lights still lit, and you happen to look, it deserves a second thought.

My first reaction was surprise. Then I thought for a moment: a private investigator. But who could it be? A PI hired by Doreen to find out what I know? Maybe, but what kind of investigator hired by her

would need to follow me all the home?... Ridiculous. This was someone in a hurry, someone ill informed. Or maybe, they were making a point – you’re being watched, my friend – or possibly testing to see if I was suspicious of being watched. Why? Who would bother with me for either reason?

I walked to the mailbox, and looked in, though the mail was always in the house before I got home. My eyes wandered around and stopped momentarily on the car with the lit brake lights. The lights went off, and the car sped down the street and out of view. That felt like some kind of victory, and I walked back toward the house. Then I heard a car coming noisily up the street, and the car roared past, going back to Weaver Dairy Road. The driver glanced my way as he drove past. Once at the corner, he accelerated without stopping onto the artery – a passing car had to brake and honked. Did he want to keep me from seeing his plates?

He was young, but the aviator sunglasses made it difficult to say much else about his face. As I thought about the situation, I could only conclude – it was chance. He was upset that he had turned down the wrong street and that I was looking at him like a criminal. Nothing more than that, I thought, stepping into the house.

The next marker in this trail of events came two days later. A call again, and this time I picked up after the message started. “What do you want from me?” I said with a bit too much passion.

The voice hesitated, then finished the odd message: “I am calling from the Keepers of the Light, and we have an important message for John Densch.”

“Speaking,” I said.

“Mr. Densch?”

“Yes, I just said that.”

“Okay. I can’t stay on the line long. I need to tell you something in person.”

“Well, I don’t care, and that isn’t going to happen. You have to stop harassing me, or I’m going to call the FCC and the police.”

“I understand, Mr. Densch. But the message I have for you cannot be communicated over the phone system. I am only authorized to say one thing.”

“What?”

“Bollum.”

“What?”

“Bollum.”

“Is this some kind of joke?”

“The exact opposite. You were followed recently, were you not?”

I got very angry. “Goddammit. If you don’t leave me alone, I *will* call law enforcement. Do you understand?”

“That wasn’t me or my associates, Mr. Densch. I am calling to help you understand. Perhaps we can help each other.”

“I don’t get your scam, but you can forget it. Leave – me – alone!” I slammed down the handset.

The very next day, on the same stoop at work where once I had stopped to talk with Samantha Ogg, I ran into someone. He danced to the left and right in perfect sequence with me. “I’m sorry,” I said, and sidestepped for the last time.

He looked retired, or near retirement, with slightly rumpled clothing and a jacket that let him keep his hands holstered. He smiled unconvincingly. “John Densch?”

“In the flesh,” I said, suspicious as always if someone knows who I am.

“You know,” he said, “I’d love to be able to say just one time – and mean it – come with me if you want to live.” When he saw budding alarm on my face, he went on: “From the *Terminator*, you know. Seriously, no violence here, and no coercion. I just need to talk to you.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I’m from the Keepers of the Light.”

“Jesus,” I said. I looked back into the building to see if there was someone I could signal to.

“Please, let me say two things. First, we know about your experience of the being you call Bollum, from your book online. Second, there are others who have an interest in this, too, and you should know about them.”

“Why? What the hell is this?”

“Because, as you yourself wrote in your book, Bollum is real. And we are a society with individuals who have had contact as well.”

“No way,” I said, and I was sure at that point that I could charge him, knock him over, and get to my car before he could recover. I was a split second away from doing so.

“Someone in our group has a message for you. I don’t know why, and I don’t know what it means, but this person was told to remember this for a John from Church Mountain. I had always assumed Chapel Hill, but I wasn’t sure until I read your book.” He paused, and I relaxed a bit. “It has to do with Henry from Cat’s Creek.”

“What?”

“Henry is falling-down drunk, but you can still learn a lot from him. That’s it.”

“What does it mean?”

“I’m thinking it must mean something to you.”

“It might,” I said, my chest constricted in thinking about Heinrich from Katzenbach.

“Then, can I have a few minutes of your time?”

I stared, trying to think, but there was no content amid my surprise. Relenting on several fronts, I said: “Yes, I guess so. This just doesn’t make any sense to me, but neither does anything I know about Heinri – Henry. If you can help me make sense of my experience, I’d be willing to give you all the time it takes.”

“Not here,” he said. “I’ll contact you on this.”

He handed me a prepaid phone, and we shook hands. I felt calm, but as he drove off – and I stood there stupidly watching – I realized that I had just jumped without thought into a whirlpool, one that could suck me down and away from normal life and, more importantly, away from any safe perch that Doreen and Brett offered to me. If this conversation meant that I was actually going crazy, I had just said yes to it.

Part 2

Derek's story picks up in the wasteland. He jetted out of the last protective tunnel into a dark ravine, one sufficiently narrow that none of the surface winds scoured it, though it was awash in dust falling out of suspension. Occasionally, he learned later, the wind direction would change and come barrowing up the ravine and sweep the dust out again. The ravine would grow slightly, and one day become sufficiently broad that surface winds would dig out its sides properly. In time it would be nothing more than a soft depression in the mostly level expanse of the surface. Tectonic forces would eventually crack open another ravine.

Derek followed Click-Cluck on her hover disk as closely as he could; more than once he came too close and bounced back and away. He couldn't see where they were going. She had banked left and zoomed up the ravine. The walls became steeper and closer, until they were no wider than two of them across.

With a sudden drop Click-Cluck disappeared. Derek didn't react quickly enough and nearly hit the end of the ravine in front of him. He then dropped straight down, and felt his hovercraft being pulled as it entered a tunnel with a powerful pressure differential. He could see his companion as a target ahead through his mask, but otherwise nothing was marked or lit. He removed the mask with one hand. The air was different than in the tunnels on the other side, smelling scorched and dirty with chemicals. There was a faint fluorescent light on the walls that let him see, once his eyes adjusted.

They did not have far to go. The tunnel and suction ended together. The space was a large cavern, dimly lit but well enough defined for his eyes: probably two football fields in diameter, the roof at a twenty or thirty foot pinnacle in the center. Occasional dust devils sweeping across the cavern buffeted Derek. This was manifestly the tidal zone for a large, unregulated cave system. The floor was littered with vehicles. In some areas, they were lined up and orderly, in others someone had begun disassembling them, but mostly they were as if dropped in place. Dust was layered everywhere.

'What happens here?' Derek asked Click-Cluck in Bug.

She lowered her disk and with surprising alacrity jumped onto a pathway amid the wreckage. Her arms caught her with just enough bend to lessen the shock. Derek meanwhile had nothing but his stringy muscles to catch him, and so he decided to land and crawl. It was a somewhat undignified landing, pitching forward on a loose pile, but he managed to get off without ending up on his face.

She said: 'From here we must walk.'

After she marched forward and he had crawled fifty feet or so, he said, "Stop for a minute. I need to do this standing up." Without his accustomed exo-skeleton, he would need to stand with some care.

She stopped but said immediately: 'You won't be able to walk for long. The tunnels ahead are ancient and no larger than they need to be.'

"Ancient? Before the council? The world government?"

Her antennae were growing agitated but she answered. 'Their origin is obscure; you might call it prehistory. Our maps show them as unsafe for travel and the whole region as an unpopulated wilderness. But everyone knows what they are for. If you have nowhere else to go, you go here. If you are unhappy with our society, you go here. If you want to die, you go here.'

He responded in English: "Why do bugs come here to die?"

'Suicide is counter to our world social order.'

He had to answer her implicit critique: "It's not part of ours, either. It's illegal, as a matter of fact."

'But still popular. What of "rhhenor n ghulhet" (Romeo and Juliet)?'

"That's literature."

'The experience of death fascinates you humans. You obsess about it in your art. We have no poetry and no art about death. We don't talk about those who kill themselves. We do not gratify with our

attention those who seek revenge through their own or others' deaths. Some who seek death come here because is believed that one can find sympathy here.'

"Sympathy?"

'Living here is a kind of death. Real death is the extension of an already shared experience.'

Derek emerged from the relative darkness of the next tunnel sifted in chalky dust and sweat, his hands, knees and elbows red and bleeding, and when he took off his mask, his eyes were half closed with forehead sweat and blood oozing from a cut on his scalp. This was just the beginning? Click-Cluck seemed not to notice, until his hollow clicks brought her eyes up next to him. She backed away and reconsidered. This was unexpected, not part of the plan, an unanticipated weakness.

The answer finally dawned on her, after Derek realized it but before he dared to suggest it. She said: 'I'll carry you.'

They both hesitated. As I've said, the bugs had no predators, being fully civilized and utterly in control of their world, but if they still had one – and long ago, there had been – then it could have been a creature like Derek, able to exploit the one weakness of their squat design: a creature that would have swept down from above and dealt them a fatal blow from the relative safety of their own backs. He was like a domesticated lion, without fangs and claws, but still a reminder of inherent vulnerability.

There was another reason, he realized as he came around to her rear side – he faced that side so seldom with any bug – and saw her female organ aiming upward. Typically, it would have been covered, but not today. It was just a break in the leather, a non-descript aperture, but the act of lying on her back reminded him of the first crude sex education screens Click-Cluck had shown him. He didn't know what else to do. They had no food or water here, other than a few chunks in a bag on her back. Already he could tell he was dehydrating in the uncontrolled heat. Making progress was essential.

She buckled slightly, especially in her one slightly akilter leg, when he kned his way onto her. "Does that hurt?"

'No,' she said, 'but it is awkward.' He couldn't tell whether she was hiding real pain as he moved, so he said, "I'm just getting settled." He adjusted himself several more times and end up finally on his back, his back and butt barely balanced on her, his head hanging over the front end and his legs dangling over the back. He lay that way for a few moments – Click-Cluck seemed to be waiting – then relaxed his neck so his face was almost forward (upside down) and his feet lay on the ground. A few more moments and she started marching. The gait was smooth; not a trot or gallop per se, the diagonally situated legs carried the weight with each step, barely wobbling one side to the other. The hands must have extended when starting and ending her gait, something he had never noticed. Maybe she was making this smoother for his sake or because of his extra weight. He felt awkward with his head leading this train, but he knew the real problem was his heels, which rapped on the ground as they went. He lifted his thighs, with great effort, up onto his chest, and clasped his hands behind them. Not ideal, but he had to save his skin. This made his head feel even more vulnerable, but he didn't slip.

Just as they entered the tunnel, Click-Cluck's great antennae bent backwards and down beside him. He couldn't see them, but longed to touch them. She knew him well; she said, 'Do not touch my antennae; they are sensitive to your oils, and you might damage them.' He assumed that that must be exaggerated, given everything they had withstood. She added: 'I'll have to have them shortened when we arrive. Hopefully we will acquire some currency ("kerrenzr") in so doing.'

Derek didn't understand her allusion to money right away, so she explained: 'That which defines your relationships on earth.' He knew her opinion of human relations, so he knew it wasn't love she was talking about. 'That which you exchange for your very selves.'

"You mean money?" he asked.

'Indeed,' she said, 'as there is scarcity and a lack of order, there must be.'

Wouldn't it be strange if I feel more at home here than she, he thought.

They made way through several more tunnels, probably four or five miles total, each time terminated by a small chamber. After the second, Click-Cluck halted and raised her antennae. Derek stood, stretching his limbs, shaking the pinpricks of sleeping muscles out of his forearms and hands. Both his feet cramped. At least he wasn't dropping blood from his head any more.

"How much farther?" he asked. Normally, this would have been a question he would have posed in Bug, but he just didn't have the energy.

Click-Cluck's antennae rocked at first slowly then more quickly. 'I don't know. We are both strangers here. It could be that at the end of the next tunnel we will walk right onto the unforgiving surface. I have only rumor and conjecture about life here. Most likely we have a few more miles ahead before we run into the first signs of life. Know that we may be stopped and robbed of everything we own – as little as we have – and we may even be killed because you are an outsider or because I am alien friendly. We must see what comes.'

Derek tried a different tack on the next leg: his shins on Click-Cluck's back, his butt and head as low as possible, his arms wrapped around his legs. She rested her antennae on his shoulders, where he could feel their weight, density and – as they undulated with long slow waves – their strength. He knew she could have kept them further to the side. This seemed to him in its way a caress, as his compressed legs and arms may have been to her.

They were silent as they continued, even after the predicted signs of life were manifest. There were side rooms off the chamber at the end of each segment, and sometimes there was a brighter glow from them and sometimes a low clicking. It was hard to know who was in them and why, but Derek thought they were recent squatters, new denizens. No border guards or security, in that way not unlike the society they had left behind, but here it could mean anything. Were these first individuals just outcasts, as likely to disappear as they were to persevere? Was there some kind of intake ahead? Could they really just be headed to their end?

Some tunnels later they entered a large low cavern, bathed in a low light glowing on the ceiling, with bugs throughout. It seemed to be a marketplace. There was a low din of clicks, a mess of Bug voices that was unlike any Derek had experienced since waking in this world. 'We're here,' said Click-Cluck.

She stopped and lowered herself for Derek to get off, and he rolled off and got on all fours. 'Please do not mingle. I will inquire about nourishment and a place to stay.' She sauntered up to one bug and then another and then another. It appeared that she was making progress, but the conversations were so quick that Derek wasn't sure. Then she had moved half way up one aisle, a good fifty meters away and barely visible, when Derek heard her voice directly in front of him. 'I've activated the intercom on your mask,' she said. 'Are you there?'

'Yes, I'm here,' he answered in his best Bug.

'Crawl to where I am. Do not speak with anyone.'

He made his way, trying not to flail too much into anyone's way but moving expeditiously. He stopped next to Click-Click.

He couldn't understand the conversation – unfamiliar clicks – but he was pretty sure the other bug was saying something like: this wasn't part of the bargain.

The conversation stopped. Click-Cluck turned her body to Derek and leaned up so she could see him with her black eyes, and she said: 'That one needs to know that there is someone who can get me out of his home when the time comes; I assured him you can.'

"Why did you have to assure him? What's going on?" Derek had to switch to English.

'I'm "selling" ("sseelghheng") my antennae,' she said. Derek went up on his knees and looked around. Most bugs were stripped; only a minority had even stumps left. She went on: 'We'll be able to get a brace built for your body, and find lodging. And I have been told that my antennae are going to fail soon anyway. Everything does here.'

She turned back to her task, continued negotiations of some kind, and finally she said: ‘We’re leaving.’ The buyer bug led the way.

Derek decided to tough things out and not crawl onto her back. He tried to be careful not to scrape and leave his bright red blood behind, but with each movement he saw how impossible this was. When they reached the end of the row, the other bug stopped by a low, flat, wheeled wagon. ‘Get on,’ Click-Cluck said. It was barely big enough for him lying on his side, but he curled up and let out a long breath of exhaustion. As the wagon was slowly brought into motion by the male bug, Derek felt himself back on the floor of the containment cell, waking up from his millennial sleep in a new world.

They stayed with Ghuggh-Clack-Gick for several bug days. The surgery required unusual planning. Click-Cluck’s antennae turned out to be a special prize. She was a well-placed member of society, an unusual bug to show up in this part of Bug World, but the market had seen other quality instruments of this kind. No, something special had been done to the circuitry of these antennae that the local experts could not explain, and that added speculative value. The surgeon conjectured that the unidentified circuits were for monitoring her, but they were much too complex for that need. In order to establish a price for the fragments a former antenna engineer was brought in. He concluded with surprise that at least some of the circuits were an enhancement for language acquisition. This would explain why Click-Cluck was uniquely able to learn Earth’s languages, but that explanation raised as many questions as it answered. She had had these antennae for many more years than she had been at the institute, so it seemed that someone in authority had steered her toward xenolinguistics and alien study – or not so much ‘steered to’ as ‘shaped for.’ Derek saw in that revelation the adumbrations of a dark and deep conspiracy, but none of the bugs was willing to speculate with him.

Were they afraid of the social order here in no man’s land?

‘Not afraid,’ their host said in answer to Derek’s question, as posed by Click-Cluck. ‘But the truth is that any of us would trade anything to be taken back by society.’

“So you’re afraid of prejudicing your chance of return? What chance do you have?”

‘That is a matter of debate. Some believe that the executive council of the ruling class has recruited agents here, on the promise of a return to the social order. Others believe that there is no return, and the rumors are just a way to make exile more bearable. The truth is all the more difficult to assess because individuals go missing all the time. With no surveillance technology, we cannot know why.’

“Why no surveillance technology?”

‘It is impossible. All forms of technology fail here. We attribute that to the special characteristics of local rock formations – which would be consistent with why this corner of our planet was never developed. But there are those who attribute the technology-destroying environment to the council, a preemptive measure to keep us from becoming a problem.’

“What do you believe?”

‘I believe that I will never leave this corner of the world and that I must find my way here.’

“What would happen if you just returned the way you came?”

‘The executive council issued a death sentence on me, and I would return to die at their hands.’

“What did you do?”

The bug explained at length, but all Click-Cluck said in translation was, ‘He took a life.’

“That sounds pretty serious. But I can’t picture a death penalty here.”

‘It is not like on your planet,’ Click-Cluck said without translating. ‘Death is not imposed for specific crimes.’

“No? Then what? Being rude?”

‘That is humor (“khenghehr”), is it not? No, the death sentence is not automatically imposed on behavior. The imposed sentence reflects the degree to which you have become undesirable in society.’

That may be a cumulative measurement, or it may be simply that you have done one thing to become undesirable in the extreme.’

“Like us?”

‘Neither of us has a death sentence. If you return, you would return to earth in unending sleep. If I return, I would likely go to another position, much lower in rank but still a position where I could serve society.’

“So he must have done something pretty serious. Or is that the way with everyone else here?”

Click-Cluck said this first one way and then other before Derek understood: ‘Everyone here faces death or a form of social death through demotion. But the fact that Ghuggh-Clack-Gick is alive here probably has significance. *You can live, just not among us.*’

“You don’t have to be here, Click-Cluck. You came because of me.”

‘I would not say that,’ she replied. ‘I came because the news that you and I have brought to Bug World is much bigger than any single bug’s contribution to society. Than anything a bug could do by herself. So much more than even you could do, Derek of Earth.’

Click-Cluck was not getting the antenna roots pulled out, but they worked on her for quite a while in order to terminate the leads that had no signal any more. After the surgery, she described something very akin to phantom limb syndrome. Despite being an artifice, the antennae were such an integral part of bug sensation that their near-complete absence was disorienting. She still moved the stubs, but it was a rapid, unnatural undulation. ‘They will eventually stop working altogether,’ she told Derek, and he could swear he heard sadness in her clicks. Or perhaps the flicking remnants just made him think so.

Derek’s mask gave out during Click-Cluck’s recovery. He removed the sensors at his eyes to create eyeholes. But the mask continued to serve its secondary purpose of softening his profile. They did not talk about what to do when Click-Cluck’s stubs died. They had not reserved any other pieces of antennae because the money was too important. She said matter-of-factly that her antennae seemed built to last and she hoped for the best.

Derek’s new brace provided support for legs, feet, arms and hands. It was mechanical and therefore immune to failure, and had a form of energy recovery built in. Derek thought maybe some portion of every movement was stored in springs, but since he saw nothing but metallic bars, held together at narrow joints, and gel-like straps that held it all to his body, he couldn’t say how. There were also gel pads at the contact points with the ground, and he would scoot on all fours like an over-mature baby who refuses to walk. Click-Cluck was impressed with the engineering, given the primitive resources in this exile.

Once Click-Cluck was ready to move, they left their host behind. He had arranged for them to occupy a small space a couple hundred feet beneath the market. All in all, this was a poor part of the wasteland, but because many came the way Derek and Click-Cluck had, there was an innocence and even social trust in this area. The market here was not particularly large or successful, given that new arrivals always came with needs and little to bargain for their satisfaction. The bugs who managed to survive in this area did so through perseverance and trust. New arrivals usually paid their initial debts quickly and moved on, deeper into this new world, where there was said to be more work. Sometimes when they returned, they could no longer be recognized, acclimated but cynical and conniving; sometimes they were defeated and thinking to go back to the world that had rejected them; and sometimes, Ghuggh-Clack-Gick said, they could look you in the eye and say, ‘I am getting by.’ He didn’t say where he thought Derek and Click-Cluck were headed.

The path downward was long and twisted. Tunnels here were a bit more generous than those at the entrance. Where there was no natural luminescence frequently someone would have put out a pot of glowing goo. At two locations the passage had gone one way, collapsed and been replaced by a tunnel in another direction. A few tools were left lying about at one half-collapsed intersection, and Derek could

see how the bugs had managed their underground world, before technology had resolved the problem for them. The first problem – how to loosen stone so that it could be removed – was handled by instruments that looked like pick axes and awls. From their size they looked designed for one hand, not the small face hands, but a leg hand. There was also an interesting device that looked like a blower for an open fire, but the bladder seemed designed to inject water into cracks, and perhaps cover the rock face with mist to reduce the amount of flying dust. The second problem – how to remove the fallen stone – seemed to be addressed by a giant metallic wok that could be put on a bug’s back. There was a broad but small handled shovel for piling waste on the back. The third problem – where to put the remnants – had no obvious answer here, but Click-Cluck told Derek that the remnants were generally taken to the surface to be blown away and pulverized, joining the dust clouds engulfing their world.

How long would it take to build a tunnel? How many bug-hours did this honeycomb of tunnels and caverns represent? Was each section like a farm cleared by a single family of pioneers, or more like a medieval cathedral being built over decades?

‘You know that tunnels are our very life,’ Click-Cluck replied. ‘Many caverns and tunnels are natural, carved by water, and only enhanced by our engineers and builders. Water shaped our underground world over hundreds of millions of years, but these effects more or less ended when our world entered its current state. The surface rarely experiences rain, and many underground bodies of water have drained and evaporated. When water has an effect, it is generally because we choose it. Where our ancestors had to intervene, they could build out an underground village and the concomitant storage areas within a couple decades. Water had to be procured in some way – perhaps by building a tunnel to funnel it from an existing storage area – and the great caverns for food staples had to be created and cured before our ancestors could farm them. Expansion into new areas demanded a great deal of cooperation, and so our occupation of much of the world came only after the rise of civilization.’

‘I imagine that this world is geologically active, but I haven’t seen a lot of evidence of earthquakes and collapses.’

Click-Cluck said: ‘You would not see damage for long. Either it is repaired or, if the stone is too unstable, the area is closed. There are many such areas.’

‘Like this one?’

‘Yes, like this one. But unlike other such areas, this one has not become impassible. Just unsafe (“ensegggh”).’

‘But that’s just a cover story, right?’

He had to explain the notion to her. She answered that there were no cover stories here. He left it at that.

They arrived in their little hovel. It was about 10 by 10, and had a small chemically florescent light fixture, partly active in his range of vision. Other bugs had been using this space for a waste area, and Derek and Click-Cluck had to sweep and haul out a number of loads of discarded wraps and rotted goop. All that was left in the common area; their host had advised this as an announcement to neighbors that they were there and not intimidated.

There was no door and they could hear quiet clicking from other small entrances up and down the common area. Derek asked Click-Cluck what was being said, but she only answered: ‘Nothing important.’

What now, Derek thought. He sat cross-legged – the ceiling was high enough to allow that – across from Click-Cluck. “I don’t know what to do,” he said. “What do we do now?”

Click-Cluck did not answer for a while, so long Derek thought that she had fallen asleep. Then: ‘We learn to live here.’

After a few motionless hours, he thought he knew exactly what was coming. They would hide out in their hovel, and he would eventually say, I want to eat a hallucinogenic dung ball, and he’d go back into

his mind, imagining himself back on earth. When his stash was gone, Click-Cluck would become his supplier, until the expense and difficulty convinced them both that he would be better off back in society. And after an unpleasant return trip – perhaps even on his own – he would lie down, an IV of the mind-control substance would go into his arm, and he would say goodbye to all of this.

They retired without saying much. This was the first time they had slept in the same space, and Derek was awake when Click-Cluck's breathing changed, becoming deeper, slower, accompanied by a low rumble that he could feel through the rock floor. He eventually fell asleep to the rhythm.

Click-Cluck woke him, and at first he didn't know where he was.

'We are going to work today,' she said.

"What work," he said trying to gather his wits.

She didn't answer, just shoved their bowl of goop at him for a snack.

When he had sat up and started eating, she said: 'We have jobs with an excavation crew.'

"You have to be kidding," he said, painting out the scene mentally.

'Not at all,' she said with her usual earnestness. 'These are coveted jobs. We have good fortune to get them. In fact, we owe it to you.'

'Me?' he said in Bug.

'Indeed. The tunnelers guild believes that you will be a unique asset (literally, stack of money).'

'In what way?'

'I am told that sometimes there are passages that too small for our body shape but that you will be able to navigate. And they have heard that your eyes see farther than ours.'

"I get to crawl into collapsing tunnels?"

'Yes, sometimes. They need to know whether it's worthwhile excavating the collapse, or whether somewhere further along the collapse is complete or still unstable.'

"And how long do they figure their asset will last before it gets crushed?"

'I am sure they will use their one-of-a-kind asset with care.'

'I'm sure,' he said in Bug, but without being able to add to his clicking voice the grimness he felt. He also wanted to spit some invectives at her for not telling him before about this 'opportunity,' though rationally he knew they had no alternatives but to conform. She had wanted to save him worry and them a fight.

They headed out after a short while, and found themselves at the tail end of a leisurely padding procession of bugs, some of whom were headed, presumably, to the excavation. An hour or so later, they came across a bug waiting at a juncture with a closed tunnel. Most bugs were waved on (literally), but a few collected at the bend of the tunnel. The foreman addressed Click-Cluck as she approached, and when she was in front of the waiting bug she turned herself around in the cumbersome way that corresponded to their four-legged disc bodies. She indicated to Derek with her face hands that they were stopping here.

Derek looked at the closed tunnel. There was not even a hint of an opening, he thought. Maybe a crawl hole even for him was impossible. Would he get paid whether he risked his life or not?

It took the crew just little time to expose a passage atop the rubble where he could prove his worth. The foreman gave some instructions that Click-Cluck reformulated for Derek's benefit, along these lines: 'First, throw the illuminant ahead of you. Find the end of the collapse. Move as little stone as you can to get through. Don't shout. If the ceiling above you has the look of boulders balanced against each other, come right back.'

A bug took a few bags off his back and tossed one through the opening. A weak green light emerged after a few moments. The bug gave two bags to Derek, but he didn't know what he could with them if he was crawling. Another bug took the two bags, tied them together using some twine and gave them back. Derek hung them around his neck. He crawled up to the opening and squeezed his way in. It was about half as wide and tall as a bug at that point and he had to slip in with his arms extended out front. After

the entry point, the passage became wider but a bit lower. The illuminant had splashed over the rock in an earth-like dispersal pattern, something like the splatter of heavy paint. The tendrils didn't extend nearly far enough ahead to give Derek a sense of what he was facing.

He heard a creak. Was that a million tons shifting in its precarious balance, or just a rock moving under his weight? He had no idea, couldn't tell where it came from.

He had to force himself under the extended edge of what seemed like a giant boulder that had plugged the collapse from above. Once beyond that, he could barely see. He undid the twine, put one balloon aside and underhanded the other up the rubble pile. Its burst pattern was quite small, but for that he could see its surroundings clearly. The majority of the collapse seemed to be in this area, beyond the boulder. A cavern had opened up, with the ceiling now about twenty feet above him. The rock seemed to have broken in foot-diameter chunks from that point in both directions along the tunnel. If this was right, there was probably an end to the collapse ahead, though he would have to dig through the plug on the other end to be sure. He crawled to the other end of the cavern to confirm. There was no way through. He tossed the last balloon at the upper end to see if its splash could hint at how loosely the rock was piled. It was pretty solid.

Derek sat down to rest. He could hear Click-Cluck calling to him, and here in this dark isolated space he felt like not answering. After a minute, he said in an elevated but not shouting voice, "I'm fine. Resting." That seemed to satisfy her. He started looking around a bit. Why would this rock collapse? He had no point of reference or expertise – the bugs ought to know where it's safe to build – but to him this rock seemed like solid stuff. He ran his hand along the edge of the collapse, and after a few moments felt something. A dip and smoothness, unnatural smoothness. This hit him like a punch to the gut. What would they discover under the rubble, or beyond the collapse?

He crawled back out with some care, and described what he had seen to Click-Cluck, leaving out the smoothness for now. The bugs gathered around, appreciative or disgusted, he had no means of telling. The foreman asked some questions about the pile on the far end of the cavern. Did he wonder if Derek saw too much? After some consultation, the foreman decided to keep digging out. The far end was plugged, but probably only with the materials from the middle section.

It would be another day before they got to the end of the cavern. There, a moment before they were all sent away for the day, Derek could see a broken, bloodied bug hand.

Derek told Click-Cluck that he couldn't understand the bugs here at all. Did they speak another language?

'No, not another language,' she assured him. There were some differences in vocabulary, new and archaic words, but the biggest change was a transformation that Click-Cluck recognized as such only because of her arthropological training. 'The language here uses verbs,' she said.

"Verbs? I thought Bug didn't have verbs."

'Our mother language has verbal phrases. That implies verbs, does it not? We have had theories about how verbs might be inflected in our language, and the language here uses one theory.'

"Does that mean that language here didn't evolve from an earlier, or did somebody bring verbs with them?"

'That is a question I can't answer,' she said. 'But there is a historian here whom we should consult – for many reasons. He might have a theory.'

"A theory about the reality of a theory? There's bugdom for you."

She responded with a thud-like click that approximated a harrumph. Derek noticed her saying less to his quips. Was she catching on to the purpose of such statements, or tired of them? He had no point of reference without the antennae. He was afraid to tell her about the tunnel collapse because he wasn't sure how she was taking to their new lives. When would resentment that he had brought this upon her

take over? How much did her inchoate religious zeal really mean to her? How much did earth history threaten her vision of bugliness and being next to godliness? Was he just an inconvenience?

“Does it seem strange to you to talk with verbs?”

‘It does,’ she said. ‘Mostly in the word order. It’s all wrong. I think you might have a similar experience if English suddenly put the verb at the end of the sentence.’

“You so think?” he said.

No reaction.

‘Let us eat,’ she said after a few moments. They had settled on a semi-formal practice for their evening meal. They kept their goop in a small trough. The stuff took forever to go south, at least as far as Derek could tell. The glop here as elsewhere tasted like nothing, dissolved almost completely into nutrients, and delivered most of the water that his body needed. After consuming in silence, facing each other, each close enough to reach into the trough, lift a small blob, form it into a ball and let it fall into the mouth, they would both move slightly away from the trough. Back in the bug society, Click-Cluck would usually initiate conversation with a question about earth. Here, she usually talked about their needs or work, something that was as narrowly practical as possible.

This evening she said nothing.

“Do you want to know, Click-Cluck, what I saw at the tunnel collapse?”

‘There was a deceased bug, yes, I know.’

Derek debated, but couldn’t help going on. “No, in the cavern above the collapse. I felt smoothness.”

‘Smoothness?’

“Too smooth to be natural. It reminded me of demolition on earth. Dynamite holes, drilled to hold a charge designed to bring rock down.”

Click-Cluck seemed not to hear.

“Do you understand?”

‘You are saying that the collapse was a deliberate effort to kill that bug. Yes?’

“Yes, I am saying that.”

‘That is impossible, Derek of earth.’ At the same instant, for the first time, Click-Cluck gestured with her small black hands, imitating, if crudely, a shushing librarian.

“Impossible?” he said, unsure of the next move.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘our rock cracks with smooth edges all the time. Like “shale” or “Obsidian.”’ The stone types she spoke in her English.

“Oh, okay,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

‘Your concern for a bug is laudable, even if your conclusions are farfetched.’

After a few moments, Click-Cluck gesticulated again, this time in a way Derek was unable to interpret, but he guessed she wanted him to move on. “Tell me,” he said, “how I go about inflecting a verb.”

“We are safe nowhere,” Click-Cluck said. “You must be patient. We will have to find a different way to communicate.”

She said that in English (more or less) as they traipsed to the latest collapse. It was quite a ways away. Quietly: “This time, find nothing, the collapse goes on too far.”

“Why? Won’t I lose value?”

“Unpredictability will lower the risk of our meeting a rocky fate.”

Derek went on, torn, beat, saddened, anxious, anticipating. He found himself becoming something of a hero. Their crew was only paid when they dug out the tunnel, and then only by the bugs who were able to pass again. If it was a small offshoot, the pay was barely worth it. If it was a thoroughfare, they could make a small fortune, but that had yet to happen. Each time so far (except when instructed by Click-Cluck), Derek had found an end, but he had not looked for evidence of sabotage again. The collapses

varied, here overhead, there from the side, and in one case the floor of a crossing tunnel overhead had legitimately collapsed (his services were barely needed there). There were no more crushed bugs, but at the end of one tunnel a bug had suffocated, apparently because of the dust that had been kicked up.

Click-Cluck's caution made him nervous. There weren't all that many collapses – surely they had done nothing yet to deserve one of the few themselves. And with the truth about how this society was kept in check as plain as the nose hidden on his face, what did it matter if they spoke of it – in English of all languages. But he wouldn't find out more from her until they came up with a plan to speak unobserved. Go to the surface? They couldn't hear each other. Write in English on paper or in sand? Who knows how the observers track here, and there are those who can translate English. Take a remote tunnel? There's nothing remote enough if someone wants to listen. Then talk in code? That seemed most hopeful. He and Click-Cluck would need a code.

He realized what they really needed. A tunnel collapse of their own, with them safely hidden in the middle. Nowhere safe? How about where they were as good as dead?

I didn't know how to tell Doreen about the Keepers of the Light. As crazy as she thought the Heinrich memories were, she wasn't ready to see me throw my lot in with the tinfoil-hat crowd. I have Brett and Amelia to thank for bringing the matter to a head, but their involvement also helped keep it from boiling over.

One day saw Brett and Amelia when I got home from work, hanging around the kitchen. "Hello Mr. Densch," Amelia said in her bright way. She looked at Brett to get him could get started – and presumably so they could get out of there. I looked at Brett, too, not to let him off the hook.

"Dad," he said, "please tell me this isn't you." He brought a folded printout out of his pocket and dropped it on the counter. When I looked at it and could only see part of the image, I glanced at him. He spent some seconds trying to flatten the sheet before giving up. But I knew.

It was a print of a blog, under the name "Dark Knights: Are You Prepared to Fight the Burning Light?" There was a headline about the latest "agent of the burning light," and below it was a picture that I recognized as me, speaking with the fellow from the Keepers of the Light on the steps of the county office building.

"Where did that come from?" I asked.

Brett wasn't biting. "It really is you. Jesus, dad." He looked at Amelia. "All right, let's go." She was expecting that, and didn't think to say goodbye to me before they were already at the door. "Bye, Mr. D," she said without turning, all innocence in her voice, so uninvolved that I doubt she even heard the dissonance between her voice and Brett's. I thought about stopping him, but decided against clashing just now.

I retired to our computer to research, and that's where Doreen found me when it was time to come to the table. "Where's Brett?" she asked. "I thought he and Amelia were staying for dinner."

"I think I disappointed him," I said.

I felt an unspoken "what now" as she pulled up a chair.

"It seems that I am an agent of the light." Although that kind of mysterious opening never appealed to her – and never got the reaction I hoped for – she was intent because of the connection to Brett. I laid out all I could in a brief exposition.

"So, what," she said after a pause. "Dark is good, and light is bad?"

"If you are afraid of the future laid out in the *Bog Monster*, then yes."

"And you're saying that people actually *believe* in that future?"

I pointed to the screen where she could see the "Dark Knights: Are you Prepared" blog. She looked at it, popped her eyes around the screen, then looked at me, knowing I could have mocked it up. I clicked into the full entry about the latest "agent of the burning light." She moved back in her chair – that text was well beyond the effort I would put into a joke. And Brett was gone.

“Dark is good?” she repeated disbelievingly.

“They have some kind of apocalyptic philosophy. They want the grid to go dark in order to protect the essence of humanity from technology. A future of robotic bodies and artificial intelligence is especially heinous to them.”

“I can’t say that I blame them for that. Sometimes I wish –” She didn’t finish the thought.

“I’m guessing Brett and Amelia were contacted by these folks after the *Bog Monster* was posted. And I’ve been followed by them, too.”

Doreen had already moved beyond. “Who is this?” She was looking at the picture of me and Mr. Keeper of the Light. “What are you talking about?”

“That’s something I have to discuss with you.”

It was an interesting moment. She was ready to scream at me to stop all the craziness, from writing about Sasquatch and aliens, to the regression and now to this Luddite intrigue, but she was also lamed by the sheer otherness of it all, by the realization that the world was stranger than her view of it, for all her partiality to conspiracy theories and Marxist aphorisms. She didn’t say a word.

“These people,” I said pointing to the picture on the screen, “say they have been contacted by the same Bollum character that I have spoken with. They even provided proof that you won’t believe, a message from Bollum about Heinrich from Katzenbach.”

She looked at me with a blank face. Okay, her eyes said, if we stipulate that, then...

“I want to meet with them and find out more about what they know.”

“Well, I suppose this means you won’t need the sessions with Meg any more,” she said in a monotone. Something good to come out of this.

I nodded, but said quietly, “Unless there’s some reason to try to contact Bollum again that way.”

“Why?” she said, and then her eyes wandered back to the blog entry. The militancy of the language there was dawning on her. War. Allegiance. Sacrifice. Ultimate values. Blindness.

“We do not want to get in the middle of this, John.”

“We already are, Doreen. The *Bog Monster* looks like a manifesto to both sides. Maybe the first one in this age of social networking.”

“Then let’s not make it worse. I do not want you to meet with these people. My God, you said you were already followed? What if you become a target, John? What if we all become targets?” She looked at me with a dramatized expression, as if the depth of the threat was still not something she felt, just deduced. We both knew the sting of being a butt to kick in front of the public eye, but this was different, at least for her: half public, half private, dangerously unpredictable, potentially violent.

“I realize that, Doreen. Until just now I never knew how nuts these people are.”

“But you knew about them.”

“Well, I knew I had been tailed, once, yes.” She got up out of the chair as if I had just confessed to a felony. “But really I thought it was a mistake, a misunderstanding. I mean, the guy from the Society said it was a tail but he didn’t tell me that these guys were kooks.”

Doreen saw she had the upper hand now, and repeated: “I do not want you to meet with these people again. I mean it, John. You have to promise, really, for the sake of your family.”

I thought: Do you believe that this can all be swept under the carpet? That life goes back – to whatever normal has been?

“Doreen,” I said in a slightly pleading voice.

“Doreen what? What is negotiable about this?”

I struggled to respond: “I’m not nuts, Doreen. And this is me. I can’t just say, oh, well, it’s someone else’s problem. Let’s say I turn this computer off and go bed. Will everything suddenly look different? I’m going to wake up tomorrow and still know this is true.”

“Some piece of what you say may be real or true or contestable, some small piece of it *may be*, John, but it’s definitely dangerous and I won’t stand for it. I won’t.” She looked me in the eye. I really don’t

know what she saw in my eyes, probably not the compassion and acquiescence she expected. “I won’t,” she said as she stood up and went into the kitchen.

“A compromise,” I said, coming into the kitchen a few minutes later. “One session with the neurologist. If he wants or is willing, Meg comes and puts me under, just so we can measure the differences. We see if there are any medical indications, and then we’re done with the regression. I won’t meet with the Keepers of the Light again. I’ll tell them to leave me alone.”

“Not just tell them. You won’t have *anything* to do with them any more, right?” She seemed happy to have a compromise, looked me in the eyes again.

“I’ll end all contact.”

“John, it’s important to me that we are on the same page. No slipping. This is the end.”

“No slipping. I do have to tell them, though.”

“You tell them and that is the end.”

“The end,” I said. After a few minutes during which she continued to cook and I stood there awkwardly, I thought it time: “Can we also talk about Brett’s association with these Dark Knights?”

The arrangements took a while. The neurologist Meg recommended was sympathetic, but when we met with him he said that he wasn’t the right person for this kind of thing. He suggested I contact a visiting professor at UNC who had done some research on hypnosis. It took time to get on that individual’s schedule, and then only for a brief meeting in his university office. I met with him on my own; he listened and quickly begged off. But for reasons he didn’t explain he called back within the week to say that he had gotten some time on a Functional MRI machine and could take a look at me. I asked if Meg could attend as well and hypnotize me. He said that he preferred to do the hypnosis, but she could attend and advise. Even better, I thought.

We met on a Saturday afternoon at a radiology clinic in Raleigh. Dr. Kurowitz met us at the door, accompanied by a furtive-looking fellow carrying a mess of keys. Doreen shook Kurowitz’s hand and while we waited for Meg they chatted about UNC hospital, where his office was and so on. We eventually decided to go inside. Kurowitz didn’t feel comfortable leaving the front door unlocked – he was visiting from Columbia where unlocked doors were unheard of – so Doreen agreed to wait just inside the door.

Kurowitz was one of those individuals who looks at you with an exaggerated expression of anticipation and distrust, as if expecting an insult or something equally distasteful. That expression remained until he started speaking, at which time his self-absorption took over, and the frown was replaced by a simple expression of joy on his face. He was a relatively short man, and chubby with a great belly that shaded into obese, though he wore it well, like a badge of the good times he’d had. At the same time, when he set about work, every movement had the air of “I’ve done this so many times before” about it, even while he was fumbling around with the controls on an unfamiliar device.

Still, he had listened to me and come on a Saturday to run these tests, so I felt bad even considering these minor annoyances.

When he thought himself ready, he moved away from the machine and struck a dramatic wide-legged stance. I realized he was waiting for me to turn toward him, and then he began. “John, there is so much we don’t know about the human mind. What we can measure here, what we know, is like a finger painting beside the Mona Lisa. We can see splotches of activity and correlate them to the inputs and outputs that coincide with them. But what it means to think, the subtleties of consciousness, morality and emotion, these are simply beyond our age. Understanding them is reserved for a more mature day, one that I hope will be better able to cope with the implications.” He paused to see if I understood the point. “Imagine that I could know exactly what you are thinking by looking at my scope here. Then imagine that I can change your thoughts just like this. Pop! Suddenly you are thinking just what I have

given you. It wouldn't matter what: All the ethical maturity I can program in, all the wisdom and experience. Or pure evil tripe. Whatever your neurons can accept. And you have absolutely no freedom left. That awaits us if we ever figure out this brain goop: the reduction of our mental interior to a processing engine."

I looked at him. Had he seen the *Bog Monster*? Was he talking about Bollum's world at the point of the singularity, or maybe the Bug World in its subservience? Or was he just playing out a thought? I couldn't tell and was happy to leave it alone.

"Of course, we don't need to worry about that today, John. We'll be lucky if we can see any telling differences between your waking and hypnotic states."

"And when I regress?"

"Should that occur," he replied, "then I have no idea what we will see – the brain would need to be stimulated by something that does not have a physical manifestation. We can suppose the stimulation of areas of the brain that would normally receive sensation, but it's also possible that another area of the brain will jump in and provide pseudo-sensation. Or perhaps the entire sequence plays out like a dream, much like hypnosis itself, where the neo-cortex tries to make sense of a pastiche of recorded memories. We may see no source area, just widespread activity. I don't know."

I realized that we had discussed hypnosis and past-life regression only in general terms. Maybe it would have been smarter if I had pushed a little on his skill set.

"There's no danger in using these machines, right? They're safe?"

"More than safe," he said, looking over his shoulder in the direction of his silent colleague. "Absolutely no impact on you, and should an earthquake or natural gas explosion cause the building to collapse, you'll be as safe as a rabbit in his hole."

"Great. So, what is the plan? A baseline scan, then hypnosis?"

"We'll play it a bit by ear, I think," he said with a lofty tone. "We're after qualitative results here, not quantitative. That will give us some flexibility to pursue interesting avenues, and with a sample of one, frankly, this cannot be a scientific experiment. Exploration is a better fit."

I looked at him and wanted to say, not exactly inspiring, Herr Doktor Professor!

"Why don't we get you settled," he said pointing to a room I hadn't noticed until then. The entire space was given over to a cot-like bed and a gargantuan set of metal, electrical and magnetic components that made the bed seem insignificant, more like a man-sized specimen slide. Kurowitz gave me the expected warnings about metal, and even gave me the once over. He showed me how I would have to lie and what braces were necessary to prevent me from blurring the image. This particular model was designed for the whole body – this was good, because I knew that Doreen would want to see me scanned head to toe – and at some point I was going to be mostly engulfed by the device and its cylinder. I lay down and got strapped in. He was about to slide me in via the control station outside, so I could get used to it, when I heard Doreen's voice. Meg was a no-show. We should start, Doreen said.

"Let's get you in," Kurowitz's voice said. "We'll give you some time to get used to things, and if you tolerate it well, I'll start the steps to relaxation and hypnosis."

I expected an opportunity to affirm, but a moment later the table started a rumbling movement into the tube. When I could not see outside the tube the ruckus began: deep resonant humming, the grind of heavy gears and a general buzz that I could not place. This was hardly relaxing, but I found after a few moments that the harnessed power behind those sounds had its own beauty, like a heavy growl before which I, whelped dog, could only abase myself.

"How are you doing, John?" At first I thought it was Doreen, but it was Kurowitz's voice.

"I'm fine. It's very loud."

"Always a good sign," he said cheerfully, as if I should celebrate this, too.

"Shall we get started?" I asked.

A pause, then: “Yes, in a moment. Your therapist has arrived.” After another delay: “Just lie back and enjoy.”

Right.

Minutes passed, and I figured they were either discussing my case or hoping I would fall into a trance without the fuss of listening to someone, given the difficulty of the situation.

Time moved slowly, but I was content to be cut off from them, alone with the visions of my past life and Bollum. After a time, I felt that little tinge, a little pain inside my torso, the feeling of jealousy that came whenever Doreen was engaged with someone else. It wasn’t paranoia, and it wasn’t the desire to find her former lover. This sadness came from our distance and disconnection, an ache that peaked whenever I saw what could have been, projected through others.

As I dwelled on the ache, I could feel everything else slide away. The grinding noise was becoming muffled, as if covered by earth, and soon I was alone with my tristesse.

What I saw then was no past life. It was an amalgam from those movies where the hero is confined inside his mind, in some kind of simulation. No background necessary, an infinite white stage. I was there, and beside me were a chair-bound Heinrich and a figure that I recognized intuitively as Bollum. He was a slight East Indian man, a projection based no doubt on a crazy association of Lord of the Rings with Bollywood. But there he was.

“Bollum,” I said.

“In the imaginary flesh,” he said. When I didn’t go on, he added: “The juice in this thing is really doing a number. I think you’re going to start seeing stars soon. I’m definitely feeling it, across light years and eons.”

“Was ist geschehen?” asked Heinrich. “Wo bin ich?”

“I have questions,” I stated.

“Of course you do,” said Bollum, “but you have to show some patience. Answers come at their own pace; the best answer is still no answer until you are able to recognize it as such.”

“Okay, fine, but I have to understand some things now. This is the last time. After today no more hypnosis, no more Keepers of the Light, no more Derek. I need to understand first, before the end, why all of this and where it has come from.”

Heinrich burst out: “Bin ich im Himmel angekommen? Seid Ihr Engel? Warum bin ich nicht geheilt?”

“Shall I answer you first, John, or this man whose entire mental sanity is in the balance?”

I looked between the two. “He’s just a projection, goddammit.”

“And we aren’t? Have a heart, man. I’m just an intelligence projected through you. Who’s to say Heinrich isn’t equally an intelligence himself?”

“All right, answer him. Jesus.”

“Hey-zus?” the chair-bound man said in his perfect archaic German accent. “Seid Ihr wirklich Engel?”

“Heinrich,” Bollum said kneeling next to him, “we are not angels. You understand me because I am inside you. I am the voice in your mind – you remember – and I have come back to give you a message. I want you to tell this story to your Captain. It’s very important.”

Presumably, if logic has any sway in this matter, Heinrich was hearing Bollum in German. “A great king had three sons, each of whom he loved immeasurably. He had promised each son that upon his own death that son would receive a portion of the kingdom. Unwisely but inevitably, the king had also promised to each one his magical ruler’s ring, whose powers enabled him to rule in peace with God and all people. The king felt remorse and sadness at promising three times something which could only be given once, but he was incapable of undoing his promise to any son, because he loved them all. Shortly before he passed away, the king had his royal jeweler create perfect copies. When he died, each son

received his dominion and the ring that his father had foreseen for him. The three sons compared their inheritance and realized what had happened. ‘This is unacceptable,’ each said, though each believed that he had received the authentic ring – so much had his father loved him. The king’s viceroy, who had been entrusted with the distribution of these gifts according to the dead monarch’s wishes, called the three sons into the royal chamber where the king lay in state. ‘Your lordships,’ he said, ‘the king has given each of you the greatest gift of which he is capable. No one except the great man lying before you knows who received his ring of power. And in one way only will the world know who has it, that is, in how each of you rules. Now he bids you to go forth and make his generosity visible.’”

After a pause: “Ist das alles? Ich verstehe Euer Märchen nicht. Werden wir nicht erfahren, was die Brüder aus sich machen?”

“I think your captain will understand. He is a clever man, even if he prefers not to be. Ask him to explain this fable to you after you have told it.”

“Er mag es nicht, wenn ich ihn um irgendetwas bitte.”

“Then tell him that the angel has commanded it.”

“Come on,” I said. “You have no right to do that to this poor devil, real or not. The allegory doesn’t seem exactly in place, either – isn’t this something that Gotthold Lessing serves up a century later? I think he tells it differently, too.”

“Really?” said Bollum, without clarifying. I couldn’t tell if he was actually surprised that there was a source for his little moral tale, or if he thought he had something on me.

“Besides,” he said, “I haven’t told it for your sake at all. It’s for Heinrich – and Derek.”

I realized that he had distracted me from my goal, and I was flush with anger for being tricked, an anger that almost reached into my fists before I sensed a presence on my other side. There he was, Derek, much as I imagined him: tall, thin, stooped but wiry strong, barely clothed, strapped into the exoskeleton that allowed him to scoot through the bug tunnels; with brown-to-black matted spiky hair, dark blue eyes, and the palest, ghostly white-blue skin. I should have expected that, but he looked like nothing more than an apparition.

“Bollum, is it you?” he said in something like German and English. Dutch or Danish, perhaps. It resolved itself in my mind so I hardly heard the original. Not English, though. That surprised me.

“Here he is,” Bollum said to him. “This is the one who is telling your story.”

He noticed me with a bit of shock, as if I had just appeared.

“Who is he?” he asked, the way a celebrity might inquire disdainfully about the mundane individual to whom he was entrusting himself. “And what is that grinding? It sounds as if the walls are collapsing.”

I was suddenly conscious of the sounds again, too, and knew my visit to this little parterre was coming to an end.

“Who is he, indeed,” said Bollum. “You’ll have plenty of opportunity to find out. You’ll be visiting each other in your dreams. I suggest you both write your dreams down – it’ll save frustration later.”

“Not good enough,” I said to Bollum and stood in front of him. “Your little trick with Heinrich and the Keepers of the Light and the secret message, it’s not enough to make this real. All of this could still just be me.”

“It is you,” he replied. “That’s the given. But what of it is more than you can bring? And how will you ever know, when you finally see all you are capable of. That’s the mind-bending part of it.”

I snorted. “And you,” I said turning around. “Is Derek even your name? Do you have an inkling of what you have done to my life?”

“Your life?” he said looking at me like – a bug. “Why should I care one rat’s ass about your life? You live on earth, you live among humans. I haven’t had a human being in front of me in – forever – and you want me to feel sorry for you?”

My sense of mistreatment rose to the challenge. “Because you’re dragging me back to your sick world. I can’t live here on earth and be constantly bombarded with visions. I just spent I don’t know how many days in the Thirty Years War as an invalid. Look at this guy.” I pointed over to Heinrich.

“Him? Who’s –” He stopped to look, and then simply stared. “Just a moment. I know him... I’ve seen a portrait with that same helmet and chair, at home, back home on earth. I think he is my father’s father’s father’s whatever.”

I looked at Bollum, who had an impish smile. I knew I had supplied that grin to him, but I thought he must be smiling somewhere. This man had to appreciate the niceties of a good story.

“Okay, Bollum, if that’s their connection, what’s my connection to them? Or you?”

“Give it more time, John. Fate will come up with something, of that I’m sure.”

The table slid out from the giant instrument. When I didn’t reply they had apparently decided to abort the experiment. Doreen was first next to me, half expecting, from her expression, to find a vegetable lying here. “I’m fine,” I said hoarsely, though I should not have been parched. Her face relaxed, but her eyes stayed on me for a sign of collapse. Kurowitz showed up next, now suddenly with a stethoscope, trying to look doctorly. Meg hovered in the background, perhaps intimidated by the technology.

I felt bad about my exchange with Derek, as if we were preening and attention-starved siblings. Maybe we were; we certainly were contemporaries and quite alike. My last image of Derek had been him putting his mask back on, an ivory-colored, creamy plastic shell of a face, with a brace that fit over his skullcap and exaggerated Egyptian eyeholes where once radar and infrared instruments had augmented his sight. His eyes were so far recessed that they were invisible, but I knew he was looking at me, with the wide, staring eyes of the condemned. Then he plunked down on all fours and squirted away like a cockroach. Just before waking, I thought: What does Bollum want with us? What does he get by putting us together?

Kurowitz leaned over, shined a light in my eyes, and then put the stethoscope on my chest, a Rockwell cliché in the worst sense. And I was thinking: What is his degree in?

“Nothing of concern,” he said, and disappeared out of the room.

Meg took the opportunity to come forward. “We didn’t hear much from you, John. You stopped responding almost immediately. What did you experience?”

I tried to describe it. Doreen had the same reaction as I did initially: that’s just more of John. But Meg seemed mesmerized. She asked a few clarifying questions, and then assumed a yoga pose as she digested what she had heard.

Doreen’s expression changed over the next few minutes. It’s done. That trumped everything else.

Kurowitz came back in with his laptop. “Let’s look at these, shall we.” I must admit, the high-resolution images and color mapping were impressive. You wanted to look at it and say, “Aha!” But even after he explained what we were looking at, it was not a visual story; his narrative was the only way to make sense of any of it. “I see activity here in the cerebellum when we begin, but it quickly changes.” He took some time trying to teach us to read the map, and then moved on. “In fact, we see activity here in the cerebral cortex that is strongly reminiscent of a REM dream state. Do you see how it pulses? Quite an unusual overall level of activity.” More extraneous and uninformative detail. “The speed with which this state was reached is rather extraordinary, something like a meditation guru. You’ve done well, Meg.”

“We never achieved anything like that,” she said, now out of her pose. “Something happened to him.”

“Happened, something from outside? I don’t see it. The visual processing area is quiet. There is no single area that lights up and sends out marching orders. The progression is natural, if heightened. He

fell asleep and he dreamed, quickly, deeply and – it seems – convincingly.” Kurowitz slammed his laptop shut as the exclamation point.

“Something took him. Do you really think he could sleep in that infernal machine?” she said dramatically. I looked at Doreen who seemed to be relishing the conflict that was coming.

“Sleep can come under almost any circumstance. Have you never slept in a jetliner?” asked Kurowitz with feigned innocence. He was on his own suspicious and sardonic turf now.

“I have,” said Meg. “All the time. But never this quickly, not directly into such a vivid dream. And that was no hypnosis session, self-induced or not. What did Bollum say, John? He could feel electricity from where he was? That machine was causing the connection to be heightened. – The cosmic connection John has with him.” She looked at me for support.

“He did,” I replied. But I couldn’t bring myself to undermine Doreen’s feeling of victory and didn’t say any more. I felt it, too. I couldn’t be sure where my mind left off, but I felt something more was there. Something that Bollum is or, more properly, will be.

“Cosmic connection?” said Doreen as soon as she pulled out of the parking lot. We both decided it was better if I didn’t drive. I didn’t respond; I didn’t think she really wanted me to. She was just sure that another bridge had been crossed and burned.

I let some time pass. “We really do need to talk about Brett.”

“What about Brett?” she asked, defensive as always when her care for her one child was questioned, implicitly or not, husband or not.

“This dark knight society. You yourself said they were unpredictable and dangerous.”

“Brett wouldn’t,” she said, as if that was the end of the discussion. Wouldn’t what? I thought. He wouldn’t choose to get involved with violence, of that I was equally sure, but – what if he was along when an innocent ride turned lethal? Do you risk your own death to make a stand against death? How many fellow travelers have over the years, centuries and eons found themselves faced with “murder or be murdered”?

I could imagine the shattering moment when the hood comes off and Brett understands that I am the target. A pistol is pressed into his hand. “He may be your father, but this is the last link to an inhuman future, an unhuman future. You have to free us all by killing him.” Brett’s trembling hand aims the barrel at my forehead, but shaking means the bullet could enter anywhere, leaving me oozing blood and who knows what else, in agony, waiting for the coup de grâce to come. “Do it,” I say with as much force as I can muster, but I mean, shoot true. I don’t look up because I fear the anguish in my eyes would look like pleading. Just do it.

Blam.

Following Doreen in my mind became easier with time, maybe for the same reason that I had fallen in with Bollum so quickly, or maybe even as a result of that incident. In any case, I found myself in the local organic-produce-healthy-foodstuff store. Who’s there? Mostly women, their fashion tending toward soft natural pastel clothing, with loose hair and camisoles. Around them the men who have adapted the same lessons, living naturally, with as light a touch as possible in this world. These men tend to be already attached to the naturalist women – and I tend to think of them as blindly loyal – but why wouldn’t you find someone interested in more? Grocery stores are legendary connection points.

In the frozen food section? Holding a package of Asian egg noodles and mumbling in a vulnerable, self-absorbed voice? Maybe following her stupidly through the store with a puppy look? I don’t see any natural suspects, but here’s the most likely scenario: One day you’re in the store with nothing more on your mind than ingredients for dinner when you innocently bump into someone, say a few words and share a laugh. The next day you’re hoping that someone picks the same time for another visit. Maybe you do this two or three days in a row, though neither speaks that second or third time. You ignore each

other, or casually smile. After crossing paths like that, you feel the guilt anyway, and skip one or two days. Then the other does, and it's over before it began. On your one or two week anniversary, you can't help feeling something – nostalgia, regret? – and meet at the exact same place, same time. You realize then. You say something like, "Didn't we meet here back when?" You are both desperate to stay talking, sharing, though not too deeply (nothing with spouse in it), until one of you manages to say, "We have quite a bit in common." A sigh and then it's time for the next step. The other: "It seems so. If you have a few minutes, maybe we can get a coffee. I would be interested in knowing more about –" An innocent arrangement, publicly and in a community store, just two adults getting to know each other. And pretty soon it's a standing appointment, unspoken, informal, a relaxing few minutes that nevertheless repeatedly demand that schedules be reworked, with occasional interruptions on both sides to indicate that, no, I'm not desperate and this isn't wrong.

Only a few days pass before the spouses come up – if two there are – and then they come up regularly. First their mention itches as a reminder that this cannot be anything more than it is, but then it fosters the opposite: a conspiracy of intimacy, a sharing of the injustice and indifference in marriage, until the marriage itself feels like a sad impedance to the humanity and equanimity of this relationship. You have only words and longing looks, but still you feel you know each other better than you know your own spouse. Everything can be discussed because you have no conflict of interest, and every compassion strengthens the ties. You so want to say how much you feel, but you fear that it will cause the magic to end, rather than deepen it.

Until one day. Maybe it's a marital fight, or a disappointment at work, or the realization that a spouse suspects something. We can't risk so much for so little, the words of sympathy communicate, so what will it be? What would it be if we were alone?

The arrangements aren't my matter and I turn and leave Doreen at her usual table. I can't see the other face, can't say whether it's a woman or man, with that disheveled hair and those hand-woven clothes. I know – and maybe both of you do, too – that the arrangements will tear you apart. Still, you've come so far you know you owe each other nothing less. – I walk outside and see a corral of cars, a few dozen models, multiplied by a dozen manufacturing years and a half dozen colors. Which two will leave at the same time, with the same goal? Such a trivial variation on the outside, I say to myself, and yet each person has the key for only one.

"Brett," I said as we crossed in the kitchen. "I need to talk to you about the dark knight society."

"Dad," he said preemptively. "Save your breath. I'm not going to bother you any more about your allegiances, so please do not harangue me about mine."

"Okay," I said, surprise in my voice. "I won't argue about your beliefs. But there's something else about this. – Have you seen the website for the knights? These are not balanced people. I'm concerned about your being sucked into something you can't control." In my mind the "blam" moment played out again.

"Dad," he said, in a tone I think he must have gotten straight from Doreen, "I'm not going to be sucked into anything. Those guys are bozos, sure, but the reality is undeniable."

"The reality?"

"The singularity. Ray Kurzweil. Do you even read any more?"

"Not much, I guess. Kurzweil. Is that like the optical character recognition stuff?"

"No. Just the most important stress point of human history."

"Stress point?"

"Okay, turning point. The day at which artificial intelligence becomes reality. After that, everything changes. Evolution takes a right turn. Either you make the turn or you skid into the ditch of irrelevance. Become a machine or get out."

“I don’t know why the one follows from the other, but, okay, let’s assume artificial intelligence is a turning point. It seems to be pretty far out in the future. There’s time to work these things out the right way, without swearing allegiance to a caveman future.”

“The point, dad, is that we have already sworn allegiance. Progress at any price. And we don’t even know what that means.”

“Longer life? Less pain and suffering? Human ideals? Democracy and justice?”

“Maybe that, for some maybe, but at the cost of our humanity, and that for everyone. Everything we hear, read, see, think and do says, you are better off as cyborgs, as machine-humans. The inevitable conclusion will someday be that we are better off as machines, plain and simple.”

“But humans have always defined themselves through their tools. Does that make us machines? That seems a bit far fetched.”

“That’s just it, dad. Our tools have always been aimed outward, while our culture created our sense of self. Now, we have tools for everything that is inside of us. Eventually we will be at the mercy of the ultimate tool: a machine of infinite intelligence, offering us a chance at immortality, at the ever so small cost of our humanness.”

“That’s better than the usual story of an artificial intelligence that wants us dead.”

“You’re missing the point, a point that you yourself made in that thing you wrote. All those dystopian visions of the future imagine us at the mercy of the AI super-villain, but the really scary thing, what scares us and should scare you, is that there is *no* vision of progress that has us keeping our human selves. Somewhere, in any vision, we lose our true selves to our artificial selves.”

“But science fiction is full of futures that are only a little different than now. Humans struggling with uncertainty and banding together in the face of danger. Terrifying future or utopian, we’re still the same people.”

“There’s your lack of imagination, dad. Lack of understanding for what’s coming. Just because you can’t feel the change doesn’t mean that it isn’t already happening. It’s like growing old. Eventually you won’t be able to deny it. But then it’s too late.”

“Thanks,” I said, but he was already on his way out. I felt considerable frustration, but now at least I understood. And some day I’d have a chance to address this fear of his. The gradual and irreversible trend of growing old was on topic, but I thought he missed the real point: we know what it means to grow old as individuals; we have no idea what it means for our civilization to mature.

Or maybe not even we as individuals. I still can’t feel in my own self what it will mean to grow older and sicker and weaker, until I die.

Doreen sometimes works in the garden. Seldom, but still. I watch her mentally. Is it someone who wandered by? A contractor seems so random, hard, cynical, sad, invasive, though the neighborhood fills with them on any average workday. A neighbor who stops to admire the camellia? That would be a pretty silly come-on line. Or maybe it’s just a friendly hello, a few sentences today, a lengthy anecdote tomorrow, coffee on the porch in a week.

Doreen puts on what seems to me a uniform whenever she decides to weed or plant. There are kneepads, dedicated capri pants, a long-sleeved light loose-woven shirt that provides triple-digit SPF, square sunglasses, and a wide floppy hat. The gloves remind me of my grandmother, plasticky white things with weeds and daffodils on them. Then the miniature spade to turn the clay and add soil.

Maybe it’s the soil. The rich, brown, clumpy stuff that you can dip your hands into and spread over our red Carolina clay: loose, moist and fragrant of moss, worms and urine. Aphrodisiac? Hardly. Symbol of fecundity? I don’t know, the stuff is just offal to me. But for others, I can imagine, it is the before and after of life, the decay and the promise, the stuff of organic necessity, caressing the unfolding root of life, the food-chain source of animal need and desire. Is that what she thinks as she pours, works, plants, minute upon minute, a ritual and Zenlike exercise? ‘I am an animal and I have needs. I deserve

more than the boxed life, the scheduled sex, the role given to me by an indifferent superstructure. I need connection. I need to feel the animal reciprocity in my genitals. I need the moments of choice that are a female's prerogative.'

Is that how it feels? I can't know, can only imagine the female equivalent to the urge that lurks in my body. Metaphors do it so little justice to the cycle of hormones that rise into the cranium, exciting the same circuits day after day, again and again. That chemical energy pushes me like an animal-magnetic force, imperceptibly but continually in the same direction: any female form might excite the connection, and an inviting smile might send the feedback loop into overdrive. I try to be mindful with Brett's girl friends, but they are female and now nubile and sweet, all of them. As I said, Doreen finds my manner both too friendly and too self-conscious, which makes sense when I consider what I should be thinking versus what my chemistry wants me to...

And Doreen? Why couldn't it be a younger man? When I think about what I might have been capable of at an earlier age, and all it would have taken is the cooperative female. The ways it might start are sordid, pornographic in their single-mindedness. Could Doreen be part of that? I have strong doubts, but the investigator leaves this page of speculations, like the others, in his notebook.

I slept, woke and remembered nothing, many nights in a row. I was lethargic at work. At times it felt like I had gone through shock therapy – I still had connections to everyone and everything from before, but all of it was behind a white shimmer of change and a gray tinge of loss. I was removed from my self – only my investigation of Doreen had gotten easier. She saw my lethargy, and I think she was waiting for me to revisit our agreement about the Society, to try to negotiate better terms, from my new position of ill-ease and need. I decided to prove her wrong.

I dialed the borrowed phone and left a message. "We need to talk. I am afraid that I will only be able to talk to you one more time. I've promised my wife that I won't get into any potentially dangerous situation. I'm sure you've seen the dark knight blog with the photo of the two of us." I hesitated to say more, and hung up.

At the computer I found myself drawn to stories of the Singularity, looking for something that might tell me that my recollections were prescient, or, more likely, that they were just a dim echo of something I had read or heard sometime. I found that Schrödinger gets a lot of play with Maxwell, because they defined two of the most enduring paradoxes in physics. I doodled a cat swatting at a grimly working daemon. "Time is nothing," Bollum had said. "Energy is everything. And the control of energy is the control of everything." Did the control of energy – from the first primitive controlled fire – inevitably foreshadow the day when the robot steps into your room: "Are you ready to let go of your body in exchange for eternity?"

And do we know what we would say? If you, reader, were faced with that choice, would you not accept the cost? Would you not choose your sense of self over your body? Your fears and anxieties over your acceptance of death? Your right to exist over your willingness to cede the stage to the progression of life?

I think I would. Should this thought experiment become reality, would Brett hold to his principles? I like to think so. Maybe it would be the hubris of youth, or maybe an ethical and moral backbone I could only dream of. Maybe it's like a drug, another circuit that, whether fed by hormones or artificial chemicals, brings a predictable reaction each time. Habit, in other words.

The prime suspect finally emerged a number of days later. I still had no dreams, although I felt less and less detached, and I wondered if maybe dreams had been coming to me in the middle of the night. To know for sure I had to wake myself on schedule, but that would be a signal that Doreen would interpret all too well: Backsliding. Obsession. In thinking about this imputed critique, I wondered, almost idly, where does a human resource expert go to get human-relationship advice? Well, for her

work, not to friends, probably not to peers – definitely not to higher-ups. Advisors, mentors. And they would have to exist in droves in a touchy-feely profession. My God, when I saw it, it was so obvious.

Our rocky relationship affected her work, so she naturally would have sought advice on how to keep the two separate. Her vulnerability was an opportunity; her gratitude could be construed as an invitation. Once you boarded that train, it might not stop until you knew you had gone too far.

That puts the responsibility, a violation of professional ethics at the least and coercion at the worst, squarely on the suspect's shoulders. When it ended, she would see that her trust had been abused and that she had let her guard down too soon, trusting and needing and wanting too much. Second degree violation of marital trust, not first. Mitigating circumstances. Reduced culpability.

In my earlier prosecutorial zeal had I reached too far? The realization came just as quickly as the doubt: If it had been coercion, then she could not go back to him or her for advice about the present, not unless some residual from that relationship continued... I wasn't ready to assume that. But it meant that either this advisor was not the same person, still a possibility, or that the original relationship had been consensual – perhaps even initiated by Doreen. Her sense of guilt might have kept her in contact, to legitimate their mutual sense of remorse. 'We made a mistake, but what we value in each other hasn't been lost.'

My investigator's gut said this had to be it. If I exploited this intelligence carefully, she couldn't help but lead me to the suspect. My limpic chemical reaction led to an unusual elation in my chest and a quickening heartbeat. My head was more conflicted. Double jeopardy might still apply, and that could make this investigation a giant sink of energy for a negligible result. Still, I was bound to continue. For all I understood the extenuating circumstances and the sordidness of my own motivation, this had to be played out like the claustrophobic drama it was, one in which the conclusion is contained in the beginning, a circular proof of its own inevitability.

Still no dreams. I tried to wake myself with my phone on vibrate under my pillow, but I slept right though and remembered nothing. Another strategy suggested itself. I would stay up in front of the TV and fall asleep there; surely I would awake somewhere in the wee hours and hopefully not too far distant from a dream. The first night I woke up within an hour and trudged dreamless to bed. I waited until the weekend, and set myself in front of a Law and Order marathon, determined to stay awake until the drowsiness could get me over the hour-snooze hurdle. It was one or two in the morning when my eyes finally closed. I woke up around four, too exhausted to think. There was a dream but it was buried immediately. I plopped into bed and Doreen grunted.

The next night was different. I barely made it through the day, and was just hanging on when Doreen and I watched a mystery on PBS. Bed was beyond welcome, although I could see Doreen eyeing me about my drowsy behavior, wondering, I suppose, if I was being evasive or if there were some other desperation behind it. I was content to leave her wondering.

Freud wrote: "Der Traum ist Wunscherfüllung." A dream is just wish fulfillment? He meant not consciously, but on a lower level where anxiety, frustration and desire fester. The un-conscious is a great reservoir of need and want over which we have no control. It has always struck me as strange that his cure was to make its influence known, as if the conscious confrontation with the unconscious would put us in control. Is this reservoir not our nemesis? Why would it suddenly respond to reason?

So I had the dream, finally. It was not like other dreams; it is and was as real as if I had been there. I feel that I was, even now.

It started calmly enough. A village, vaguely European, but clearly pre-rail, early modern. The place stank. I could smell all sorts of odors, not just the mounds of waste for fertilizing, and not just the steaming pile left by a cow going in to get milked. Thick, spark-laden smoke spread out low from the chimneys scattered among the dwellings. A few brick-enhanced among them, but mostly they were mud and hay, leaning creations. Voices here and there, lives oblivious to me and the intrusion I signified.

I could feel the hooves before I heard the bass of the clop clop and the timorous clank of metal. Don't think I didn't know what this meant. The quiet life of these villagers was about to end, one way or another, abruptly, probably brutally.

The first riders rode past me as if I were invisible. I couldn't tell if they ignored me because they had orders to occupy the center of the village before stopping, or if I was indeed hidden to them. As I watched them another horse came from behind. I turned in its direction; the rider veered toward me and then cut away, but not before kicking me square in the chest with an outstretched boot. I flew a few feet and landed on my backside, a sequence that knocked the wind out of me from both sides. My lungs felt like collapsed balloons, their membranes stuck together well beyond the force of the induced vacuum. My chest burnt, the fire exploding up and down my insides, into my throat and out into my arms. I was suffocating right there, and whether actual or not, I was going to feel the pain as if it were.

My breath came back in little bits, and the pain subsided into mere panic, and then despair. I saw more riders pass, and then the first foot soldiers coming up the road. I wondered when I would get my next introduction to this new brutal order, and even contemplated running. There were woods beyond the field I'd been kicked into, and though they probably concealed a swamp, if I got far enough any pursuers might lose interest. Or they might need to make an example of me, and search until they could drag me back at a gallop behind their military horses.

I lay waiting. Would I see Heinrich? The Captain? Did I have any intelligence, clairvoyance or invention I could trade for my freedom?

The village had become silent, deserted. Maybe they knew exactly how to escape without being seen. Maybe I was the last resident.

This misapprehension lasted for a number of minutes before the soldier search parties coalesced. Teams entered each house. Some crashing and a mortal scream in one house, but mostly talking and pleading. The families were negotiating for their lives, their homes, their honor. Everyone was brought out, more people than you could imagine, mostly kids. One lifeless male body was drug out, along with a woman who was being restrained by two soldiers. Then two other soldiers were dispatched from the village center to come get me from the cow field. They looked annoyed and gestured for me to come with them into the village center. No need for unpleasantries, they seemed to be saying: You'll be dead in an hour, would it cost you so much to exercise some civility? I got up, still contemplating my escape, but I decided against getting to know more about dream pain.

The civilians were gathered in their square, with a central well and an area of cobblestones around it, clustered in their family groups. They looked at me but were vastly more interested in their own situation. Some soldiers were guarding them while others continued the plundering. The woman had disappeared. At one point I thought I heard a scream, but if so, it was cut off so quickly as to be unidentifiable.

This went on for an hour or so. A collection of possessions was brought together near the well: boots, shirts, pants, undergarments, coats, blankets, some silver crucifixes. Animals were herded off the way the soldiers had come.

I was suddenly and revoltingly aware of my own indifference. Was this the point of my experiencing this? To show my complicity? A bit of revenge from my unconscious – or from Bollum? Maybe they underestimate me, I thought, and I looked around to assess my chances. Any one soldier seemed vulnerable – I was a few inches taller than most and quite a bit more solid – but as I assessed my odds I saw the weightiness of my enemy. My advantage would end with the second soldier's approach. This was an overwhelming force brought in to assure compliance. No one need die in miscalculated conflict, it said.

“Kapitän Poulus,” I said under my breath, then with increasing intensity. Finally I said it loud enough that the people around me heard it.

‘What did you say?’ asked one soldier in the vernacular.

“Ich muss mit Kapitän Poulus sprechen,” I said in my best High German.

They nevertheless looked at me as if I was speaking non-sense. So I said it in my American English.

That got them interested. It may have been too strange to sound like English and close enough to Scandinavian to make them suspect a Swedish spy. I was separated from the rest and brought into a small house. They had me sit at the table. Someone brought in a quill, small inkbottle and a piece of paper.

“Write,” a soldier said in something akin to English.

“What should I write?” I asked.

The two guards exchanged looks, recognizing perhaps what I said. But they just pointed at the paper. “Captain Poulus.”

So I was to write him whatever I intended to say? Was this just a step in implicating myself before they run me through or begin the torture to extract a fuller confession?

I wrote to him in German, as best I could: ‘Dear Captain, You will be surprised to receive this letter, but I need to avail myself of your kindness. I was found in a village by some of your soldiers and they think that I may be somehow involved in military operations. This is not the case. I am here for one reason only. I need to find Heinrich of Katzenbach and deliver an important message to him. I understand that you may know where I can find him. I would be eternally grateful if you could facilitate my speaking with him.’

I handed the letter to the guard. The soldier could not make heads or tails of my 21st Century handwriting; I’m sure that it seemed like nothing more than a child’s scratches. Nevertheless, he rolled up the sheet and stuffed it in an inside jacket pocket. He disappeared.

What now? The other guard was posted at the door to watch me, but they had apparently decided I was too dangerous to interact with, so he waited just outside. As I sat at that table, I started to put things together. This was no doubt a dream brought to me by Bollum, probably a simulation like those that Bollum himself lived through so many times. As such, one could imagine that the outcome was already ordained, whatever Bollum wanted to do with me. Had I pissed him off? If so, he might share some of the history of human brutality with me.

Was this his way of confessing that Heinrich was invented? And would that also be an admission that Derek was nothing more? Was I chasing the shadow of someone else’s fantasy? And if Bollum were himself just a construct of my own mind... was Derek the shadow of a shadow of a fantasy?

The wait seemed interminable but was over before I realized it. Dreamlike. Horses snorting, thuds and metal clanking. Steps, voices, marching feet. I was impressed, and not a little afraid.

A few heads poked in but no one said a word until an imposing figure marched in. He was not short, probably about my height, with broad shoulders and a thick neck. He seemed to taper off from there, a bit like a superhero caricature, though he may even hid a bloated belly, for all I could tell under his gear and some loose garments thrown over. His hand was on the butt of his sword.

He stopped and stared in a quizzical way. I think he was the first person to notice that not all was right with my clothing. Or had they just changed?

“Who is addressing me?” he said in his German, in the present, as if we had already spoken. Or perhaps he counted my note. I also thought that he was leaving the possibility open that I might answer by flaring my wings.

‘I am a friend of Heinrich’s,’ I said in my High German.

‘Then you must know,’ he said, walking to gain a different perspective on me, ‘that he has already gone to join the Lord.’

‘Of course,’ I said and looked down. Why then was I here?

‘You can say to me whatever you might have told Heinrich.’

His eyes were as piercing as they had been in my regressions, although his face was older, more lined. Had so much time passed?

‘How long has Heinrich been dead?’

‘A long time. Maybe six years. But should you not already know that?’

I thought long about that. Was I here to speak with him?

‘Captain, how long have you been at war?’

‘I cannot tell you. More than the six, less than my life. I suppose that I am 30 years old.’

‘Did Heinrich tell you a fairy tale about a king and his three sons?’

‘I don’t recall him telling me anything about a king,’ he said, finally sitting down across from me.

Was that the reason for me to be here?

I began telling him the allegory.

He put up a hand. ‘I recall now. I forbade Heinrich to tell me that blasphemous tale. I cannot hear it. The words themselves are grounds for excommunication, if not death in the Inquisition... Why are you here?’

I hesitated, but said: ‘To finish telling you the story.’

‘Do you wish that I die?’ he asked in all sincerity. ‘That is much to ask of someone who has done so much to stay alive.’ I wondered if that statement included a threat.

‘I don’t want anyone to die.’

He was searching my face, and seemed most fascinated with my teeth. ‘We all die in this vale of tears. But we cannot see clearly what comes when we do. Is it worth dying younger than one must? What comes if I should repent? And how to do that? What can you tell *me* of Heinrich?’

I began to see in him the look of someone who has won more times than he can count, but finds himself on an inexplicable losing streak. This was a man desperate beyond his condition.

‘I have seen him,’ I said. ‘He has seen his maker.’ Not lying – not exactly.

He drew a cross with his fingers. He seemed ready to believe anything I told him.

‘This is what I have to tell you,’ I said. ‘We are all guilty, but faith saves all. Believe in good, do good, love your enemy, and measure your actions against the pain you cause others.’

He stared, waiting for more.

‘Don’t despair, Captain Poulus, there is a place in heaven, even for you. You cannot bargain that place away, but you can walk away from it. You choose to abandon it by not caring.’

No reaction.

‘Do you care, Captain?’

He nodded, not sure, I think, what he was assenting to.

‘Let us celebrate your place in eternity, and help some mortal souls today.’

I stood up and after a moment, his countenance changed. He looked like a man hoping he had just broken an oppressive streak. Betting everything that it was so.

How do you explain at breakfast, in passing, that you may have saved the lives of an entire village? Well, perhaps not everyone. But the fact that the village wasn’t razed for being heretic sympathizers – that was Captain Poulus, with me at his side. The fact that the villagers were left with some breeding livestock. The fact that no one was swept up, no one pressed into service. Maybe two dead. Just, I might be tempted to say.

The feeling of success wasn’t diminished by the fact that it was imaginary, a computer-plied reality. But how to explain that to Doreen? She would be convinced that I was the source anyway, and then she would ask why I was cultivating the fantasies that we had agreed to leave behind. I had no answer to that. Bollum is testing me, I wanted to say, but how is that an answer, if Bollum is just a symptom?

“You look chipper this morning,” Doreen said.

“I feel good,” I said.

She smirked at this unmotivated change in mood, but was also pleased.

I knew that this was the moment, the absolute best chance to surprise her, to pursue questions about her mentor-lover, but I just couldn't. When we happened to share a moment, it was too rare to squander.

We sat together at the breakfast table for no more than five minutes. As she left she planted a kiss on the top of my head. I cannot put into words how important such minute gestures were in the sea of so many indifferent days.

I never returned to the village or encampment. I thought I might not, but I wasn't prepared to see myself that very next night winging instead through a canyon on the surface of Bug World. Thus began my reintroduction to Derek. We eventually found an accommodation. Although I was nominally him, we both knew that this wasn't true, and I found myself drifting to a third-person perspective. A gamer's perspective, I realized. We didn't communicate through thoughts at first, and he never even looked behind himself, so you may wonder how I knew that Derek was aware of me. Indeed, doesn't that show the artificiality of the situation, where awareness is not bound to the senses? An alternative suggested itself. Yes, this was Bollum and his infinite simulation machine, but it might also be Derek *reliving his life for me through Bollum*. Could he be remotely plugged into Bollum's black box just as I was, only as the source, where I was the recipient, the absorbing creek bed – each of us as bound to the exchange as the other? I didn't know why this seemed right to me; it could have been just more Bollum manipulation.

You know the story to this point. Derek was counting the days until he could share a demarcated death zone with Click-Cluck and find out what she knew. We'll skip over these many days and get to the transition. I was becoming bored with my dreams of Bug World by this time, already more numerous than the sessions with Heinrich, and they were filled with little more than the mundanity of bug life, less engaging as such than the strange existence I found in Heinrich.

That morning was like every other. Padding through the dimly lit tunnels and even darker caverns, we followed a long line of downtrodden bugs, though still the lucky ones, because they had work and the semblance of purpose. Derek moved nearly as easily as the bugs, but you could see the artificiality of his scooting on all fours in the cadence and rhythm of his appendages. I would guess that he worked twice as hard as those around him, but that output had become his norm. I tried to remember what his body had looked like when he had traveled by scooter. I don't remember seeing the bugs otherwise than they seemed now, but the sedentariness of the world social order would no doubt have had an influence on their appearance. You wouldn't necessarily see flab and expansion, since bugs would have exercise regimens to keep themselves from becoming burdens on society. No, it's just that there is a difference between work and an exercise regime. The latter may in the end be more productive, but it plays out differently, distorting the shape and the stress points on the body towards the particulars of the regimen. A varied form of work may be as stressful and wearing, but it spreads the effects more broadly, diffusely.

Lean bugs, then, capable and hardened, but not joyful, perhaps even morose. The same core crew met every day at a site or, if there were none underway, at a bend in the main tunnel, wherever the crew supervisor waited. Sometimes they picked up additional bugs for a large job, and sometimes they were disbanded as soon as they had come together. The most senior members would get some money on those days to keep them coming back, but for the rest it meant nothing for the day. Derek and Click-Cluck were mostly able to eat, but on rare occasion, when there was no work for several days, the money and the goop ran out and they had to settle for water and something bugs chewed like gum, which at least stabilized Derek's blood sugar. Fortunately, those days were few.

On this day they had a big crew. The walk to the site took two hours. The tunnel at the collapse was very small, indicating that few domiciles were on the other side and that the pay would be low – the number of workers was already a source of grumbling – but the supervisor announced as they arrived that they had been pre-paid a handsome sum to dig through to the end of the tunnel. A particular family

knew their son to be there and they wanted him saved at all costs. Derek sent a glance to Click-Cluck as if to say, we know already we'll find a corpse. Of course she had no way to notice.

The collapse seemed total from the outside. Derek anticipated not finding any end to it. He was surprised when he positioned himself to crawl in and the supervisor clicked at him: 'No need today; we dig until we are through.'

Derek moved off to the side, wondering if that would affect his share, and then he reached a decision. 'I'm going in,' he said in Bug to Click-Cluck but so the supervisor could hear, 'to see if I can find the young bug.'

'We are paid to dig him out regardless,' said Click-Cluck.

'Even so,' Derek replied, 'if he is alive we may want to dig differently.'

She didn't reply to that, but the supervisor said: 'Go.' He may have calculated the possibility of a bonus if they did find the boy alive.

A crawl hole was finished, and Derek tossed in a glow bag. He followed. The collapse was recent enough that dust still pervaded the collapsed area, fed now from loose pebbles and particles falling from above. Derek left the glow behind and crawled another twenty feet. He found bug accouterments on top of the fallen rock. Before he tossed another glow bag he could make out a weak light source within the cavern above, whose floor had collapsed in this area. The floor seemed to have been someone's dwelling. Was that instead the target? Its exit had been collapsed as well.

Derek dropped a glow bag and kept moving. The dust got thinner as he went, just floating particles too small to settle out on their own. He almost couldn't see the previous glow spot when he saw the top of a doorway. He threw a bag in.

He stuck his head in. Nothing but dust in the air and a centimeter-thick blanket of soot over bug belongings. He didn't have too many bags left so he stumbled unseeing over the debris to the next doorway. "Hello," he said and waited. His voice would have been as strange as an angel's voice to any bug in that space, but he thought they ought to answer anyway. "Anyone in there?"

That is when he noticed that a part of the floor above seemed to have given way but not fallen, resting atop another piece that had fallen and lodged vertically. Had the vertical piece moved or been moved by his hand, he could easily have been killed. But this could serve his other purpose. It wasn't a slam dunk, but he could make it work. He dropped a glow bag on the edge of the opening into the next dwelling. Much like the other, the floor was thick with dust and particles. He slipped through the opening and faced out of the dwelling. He looked around for hand-sized rocks. The first one he tossed even as he dove into the dwelling. Nothing happened. The next he threw harder, but still as he was moving away. For the third he moved back and then stepped into the throw. It made a cracking sound and bounced around in the debris for a while. He grabbed a much larger piece and as a final gesture did a two-hand shot put against the precarious piece of ceiling. The chunk hit and then fell with a great clap, but nothing happened.

The ceiling pieces collapsed on their own time. The surprise impact deafened him and the shock sent him backward. He sat down in the dust, coughing and holding his head. His ears ached and pulsed. He wanted to look and listen to see what they knew outside, but he was incapable. After a couple minutes he mastered his cough and stood back up. His view of the outside was almost completely blocked. He could still have climbed out, although at some risk because he could not see what would meet him in the pile.

This was almost perfect. He tried shouting but could barely hear his own voice. The dust was too dry and thick. He turned to his version of clicking, which did not carry as well but was much less impacted by the dust. 'Click-Cluck,' he said, 'Click-Cluck, I am stuck. I am fine, but I need you to come help me. Only you. The area is unstable. Only you, Click-Cluck.'

Eventually he could hear her clicks over the ringing.

'Can you dig out? You should dig yourself out.'

Thanks much, he thought. ‘No,’ he said, ‘I don’t have the right angle. You should be able to do it quickly and get back out.’ “Please, Click-Cluck,” he voiced. Would she recognize the opportunity?

‘We will dig toward you,’ she replied. The supervisor must have decided that, he thought.

‘Please wait,’ he said. ‘There is more here to explore. I think I may hear someone. You can make it through, Click-Cluck, but it’s too unstable for more. Please help me do my job.’

There was silence, then he could hear the crackling of moving chunks and settling gravel. ‘I’m coming,’ she said. He saw movement in the various circles of glow light. Click-Cluck appeared in front of him, but she didn’t pay much attention to him as she assessed the roof and the precariousness of the rubble on which she stood. Finally she raised up her eyes to look at him.

He said quietly: “We can talk now.”

She did not reply.

“We’re safe.”

“We are never safe,” she answered in her English (at least, I continued to hear it as English). Then in Bug: ‘This is very dangerous.’

“We need a code to communicate.”

“They can decode anything,” she replied.

“Morse code in English?” Again, I heard English, not Danish or whatever it might really have been.

‘Child’s play,’ she answered, once again in Bug.

“Hand signals?”

‘Observable.’

“Taps?”

‘Audible.’

“Taps on skin?”

She paused. ‘Perhaps.’

“We could each tap out a code on the other’s arm. It’ll have to be when we lie down to sleep, I guess. We’ll need to sleep closer.”

‘Yes, we will.’

“What code, then?”

She was not completely surprised by all this. She answered: ‘English alphabet order. First finger for groups of 10, second finger for even numbers, third finger to add one.’ Derek didn’t understand until he felt her type out his name on his arm.

“What happened to make you so afraid, Click-Cluck?”

‘Not now. Now you must crawl out yourself.’ For realism she shoved a slab that lay beside her, and it slid downward off the debris pile, and shattered against the wall.

In the following silence, perhaps only because of the contrast, a low moan or plea could be heard from the dwelling next door.

Part 3

I experienced Derek and Click-Cluck's nights with unusual clarity. He was often bone tired, and she frequently plopped down with the failing muscles of a creature at the end of her strength. They arranged themselves a half arm away. Even if they did not communicate every evening they didn't want someone who might be observing to look for a pattern. Derek would lie on a side, and put out his unfettered arm to Click-Cluck. His hand would clasp her left face-arm, and she would take hold of his forearm with her other. Gently he would tap out their code with three fingers: press, press, rest, or rest, press press, press, or any of 30 plus codes, with spaces and a few simple punctuation marks. They worked out special codes for common words as well, using simultaneous long-short presses.

Her little black arms had a dappled black skin, like a dog's nose that had been dried. Inside he could feel cartilage, muscle and bone, but small, tensed and surprisingly dainty, the same experience you might have tracing a dog's lower back leg. Her fingers moved more slowly than he anticipated, reminding him of a baby's fingers, touching slowly, but for all that with unexpected force. It was as if these hands, so rarely observed with eyes, were left uncivilized, unmannered. He had never seen bugs share these hands, but he thought maybe they did for a special other, like a bug form of kissing.

One night he did ask with taps: 'Do bugs ever touch hands and arms like this?'

'Not these arms,' she replied. 'When we mate we may hold the hands on our standing appendages.'

'Does it bother you that I am holding this arm?'

'It does not.'

'Does it feel good?'

She did not respond until he tapped the code for a question mark. 'No, it doesn't feel good,' she said. 'These arms want to be free.'

'I understand,' he said.

'It is all right,' she continued. 'I do it happily.'

'I would go crazy without it,' he tapped.

'I would, too.'

The tapping would often go on until one or the other's fingers would stop mid-tap, and the other would press the finishing signal of three times three simultaneous long presses. 'Good night.'

It was his first regular touching in years, and he couldn't deny the effect it had on him. He felt closer to Click-Cluck in so many ways when he held onto her face arm. He found it soothing, and came to appreciate the musky smell of her oils and even the sour smell emanating from her throat. There was also the frequent production of methane and other gaseous excretions at her tail end. He couldn't complain, of course: his body didn't smell as it might on earth, but he rarely cleaned it and the oils spoiled. He farted frequently, too, a consequence of the diet.

Were his feelings just because of the touch? The lack of alternatives? The mammalian need for connection? Or was there something between Derek and his bug protector, an impossible attraction, something beyond mutual dependence? I say yes, but without a real way to act upon that attraction, a way that was mutually of interest and gratifying, there could only be longing, undefined and expressed in gestures, as awkward as their conversations in code.

Click-Cluck described over a number of nights how her awareness had been raised. Shortly after the antenna surgery, she began to hear voices, occasionally and often unclearly, but very unlike the voice that had given her the scripture. The new voices were confused and mixed together, and the mishmash scared her until she realized that every speaker was as nonplused as she. She eventually traced one of the voices to a purchaser of an antenna part. Thereafter Ghuggh-Clack-Gick decided to have a section

installed on himself, and he realized what was happening. The antenna not only moved sensory data to the bug, they transmitted thoughts bi-directionally. This was unimaginable to the bugs, but there it was.

Together, Click-Cluck and Ghuggh-Clack-Gick were able to calm and reason with the other bugs who had purchased antenna chunks. The group settled on two possible explanations. The first was that some force within the ruling class had created the technology in pursuit of an agenda to influence Click-Cluck; bi-directional communication was simply an unintended consequence her transplant. The second saw the technology as a honeypot, intended to collect bugs susceptible to anti-ruling-class and conspiratorial thinking, to collect them together in a group, one that might deem itself immune to observation, and then eliminate them.

Until Click-Cluck and Derek began using their own secret language, she had resolved to keep all this from Derek. He knew it was to protect him, but maybe also a bit of protection for her, a halo effect from his innocence. He put little stock in that. He supposed – in the spirit of *1984* – that the target wasn't any particular bug, but rather the expression of the ruling class's absolute power.

How does a bug who has never lost faith in the integrity of her society and its order, despite her rebellion against it, deal with – and explain in her own mind – the complete dissolution of that order? Does she feel despair for a corrupt ruling class? Or does she hope for something greater than they could conceive of in their idle gaming – an unseen chessboard where they themselves were just pawns? Derek told me their only choices were to keep crawling in the dirt with their heads down, or to stand up in a faith that there is more. He practiced these earthly words with Click-Cluck until he thought he could hear all the refinement of a voice box emanating from her bug mouth: “I believe.”

Despite her success, a bug has no direct way to vocalize a human language. Their own language consists of a number clicks, pops and tones. Only the background tones involve the exhalation of breath, but then without the quick changes that allow the human voice to distinguish consonants, let alone consonant-and-vowel combinations. Click-Cluck associated her clicks and pops with certain human sounds, judiciously using tones to fill in. Derek understood because of his long exposure to her – I could follow her only through his filter.

Derek had no special skill for analyzing bug language, but by this time he had learned a great deal. I've given a count elsewhere of the number of sounds that make up Bug, but that was wrong. There are no fewer than 100 different clicks and pops, based on some twenty different vocalization types. The five or so different combinations for each type might be understood as consonant-vowel combinations, though vowels as such are not part of the language. Low, resonant background tones are ways of modifying their clicks and pops both semantically and emphatically, depending on the tone in question and the context. These tones are created by special echo chambers near the bug lungs that are likely repurposed sexual attractors.

Derek had become fairly adept at using his tongue to emulate the pops and clicks, but its softness made some sounds impossible. He made no attempt to do the tones while speaking, which left him on rare occasion making faux pas of epic proportions, at least for those able to make any sense of his tongue's acrobatics. And yes, they do have tongues and they are used for some sounds. The sideways mandibles, which had initially contributed in Derek's mind to the appellation of bug, were sometimes involved as well.

There is no term for history per se in Bug, since the idea implies content expertise, theoretical insight, discovery, and a certain volatility in the subject matter as techniques and knowledge evolve. In Bug, the equivalent word means rather “chronicle,” with various grades of specificity: there might be a chronicle of a certain institution or of an extended project, such as the exobiological expeditions. There are only authorized accounts, and insofar as a theoretical apparatus exists, it is provided by the ruling class.

The notable exception was the historian bug Click-Cluck had mentioned. By all accounts he had studied the bug past as history, dissecting it in ways no one had done before. In this outcast community, he was even more renowned for his longevity. “May you be protected like the chronicler,” was a local parting word. Any bug in this place could tell tales of a bug who had championed a unique point of view – say, the need for a government – and then disappeared. The lesson for the rest was to live simply, keep that head down, and hope not to be noticed.

Like me, Derek had gone through a crisis of belief in Bollum. Since leaving the bug social order Derek had heard nothing from him, and he was beginning to think that Bollum was a figment implanted in his brain by the ruling class, a ruse to control his xeno-consciousness. Then the afternoon came where we met.

That convinced him otherwise, but he still had to wait a long while to communicate with Bollum again. I got to feel his frustration. He wrestled with the thought of sharing what he knew of the burning-light technology with Click-Cluck, but now the possibilities took on a special significance. If Click-Cluck was ready to become a revolutionary, his knowledge was could start that revolution. At least, if it was real. If they tried to develop the technology and it wasn't true, well, that realization could come at a very high cost for him, her and anyone with a modicum of faith in her. He didn't think his own faith in Bollum reached that far.

I couldn't help him, which he knew. We had developed what he called “the loop.” He could now watch me watch him and sense what I was thinking, as I could sense his thoughts. It didn't seem to loop more than that, thankfully. He found out about the rival societies sandwiching me, and knew the little that I remembered from my earlier encounters with Bollum. “You have quite a bit of that wrong,” he said.

We did agree on Bollum's dictum: “Time is nothing. Energy is everything, and the control of energy is the control of everything.”

In a quantum age, this point of view seems easy to legitimate. Time is understood as a vector whose directionality is more accidental than anything else, not unlike the seemingly accidental fact that we are made of matter, not anti-matter, its counterpart. Einstein's energy-mass equation provides a translation that, while not promising that all matter can resolve itself into energy, provides a schematic for everything from the big-bang creation of the universe to the nuclear weapons of our era.

On the human scale, control is what matters. Energy is the interaction of matter, and these interactions assemble time. Control energy and you control matter. Control matter and you control time. You can't *stop* time because there is only so much that our crude hands can make energy do, but you have a handhold where otherwise you are simply at the collective mercy of the four fundamental forces and the three Fates. Who knows just how far we can go by giving things a push in the right direction.

For now, Bollum and I remained a secret on Bug World. I couldn't tell if Click-Cluck had suspicions against Derek's occasional introversion and barely whispered monologs; he wouldn't comment on her. He was protective of her. “She's not crazy, you know. It all makes sense now that we know that someone was pumping that scripture stuff into her. We need to know why.” I wanted to ask: then how can she go on believing that a divinity spoke to her, despite the evidence? But he left the topic there. He also wouldn't engage on whether maybe Click-Cluck still wasn't telling him everything, whether she didn't trust him fully.

In addition to being lovesick Derek never let up being homesick. He saved the dung balls for a long time. One day while Click-Cluck was shopping for food and who knows what else, he took one. He was still unconscious when she returned. I could see the scene, but she was inscrutable to me without his insight. She hunkered down with him that whole day and night.

Derek had a fleeting vision of earth. In my earlier remembrances he was a patient of the Oregon state mental hospital, but that seems to have been interference from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. This time around, he was in some northern European climate, and after coming to, he was being driven home again. The last time his mother had cried as he disappeared back into Bug World. Today only his father was in the car. Derek sat in the back seat, propped up by the seat belt. I don't know but maybe his father was reluctant to have him close to the wheel. He was welcomed home at a subdued reunion at his parents' house, as if there had been too many disappointments to celebrate anything. Or maybe the edict was not to excite him.

I tried my best to notice place signs and the like during the drive, but I saw nothing concrete, just streets and schools and the like. After searching the Internet I concluded that the names were at best a jumble from his memory, no roadmap. Or not to be excluded: from an alternate universe.

Derek enjoyed a quiet meal, with his parents hovering and talking in dribbles about local news, schoolmates and marriages. All of a sudden, Derek stood up and went into the hallway, where family photos were on display. He stopped in front of a glassed-in drawing, a yellowed and damaged sketch of a captain beside a young injured soldier. I want to say with assurance and bravado that they were Heinrich and his Captain, but there were many differences to what I had seen in my visions. They could have been after all – remove the interference of the portraitist, of Derek and of me, our prejudices and assumptions, and perhaps the identity would be obvious. As it was, Derek was not satisfied either.

“Tell me please about this ancestor.”

His parents traded a look: is this good or bad?

“We don't know much about him,” his mother said. “That's your father's side of the family, the Catholic side, from Germany. All the records that might have helped us were destroyed in the war.”

“I heard once from my grandfather, who cared about these things,” his father stated blandly, “that he was a captain in the Catholic forces during the Thirty Years War.”

“You mean,” Derek said slowly, “the captain is our ancestor, not the soldier?”

“I have never understood why this scene was drawn,” said Derek's mother. “The other one looks so sickly, it's as if the captain is showing off that he visited a lazarette.”

Derek's father took the portrait from the wall, and looked on the back, hoping or half remembering that there was an inscription of some kind. Poulus, 1634. “That was the family name,” he said and handed it to Derek.

He could feel me, of course, as I could him. As I have said, I thought he was reliving his life in some way for my benefit, and that may explain why my heart was pounding so much more than his. Neither of us needed to say a word. If this experience/memory was to be trusted, the Captain was his family. And maybe Heinrich was mine. Maybe the connection between us was the Captain's prostitute, who had in all likelihood copulated with Heinrich before he died. Perhaps cousins after all?

I woke in a sweat, with a new mission: I had to find Derek's family. If he was going to be kidnapped, I had to prevent it. If he had already been, I had to share what I knew with his family. I had to help for my own sake. Doreen could have nothing against this – it wasn't involving myself in the tussle over the burning light, and it wasn't getting lost in my visions. If there was no Derek Sorensen, then the problem was solved another way. In either case, peace at last.

The elation of defining a goal didn't last. Google told me that Sorensen is widespread in Scandinavia and most notably in Denmark. In that country, 2 out of every 100 people have that last name (technically, Sørensen). Derek is a derivative from Old German Theodoric, “ruler of the people.” In a recent year, some 80 male Danish babies were given that Christian name. As a statistical matter, therefore, one baby every year was likely born a Derek Sørensen. All well and good, except that no self-respecting society will tell me which Sørensen family has a young Derek in its midst. I am pretty sure that he was taken while still living at home, not out on his own, so I would have to make inquiries with

some 50,000 Sørensen families in that country alone to find the right young man. Assuming he was even born yet.

I had to convince Derek to tell me more about his home. It was so simple, and yet Derek's response was equally simple. "No," he said quietly when he read my mind. "You can't do that to my family."

Do what? I thought. I want to save them from losing you – or from the uncertainty of not knowing what happened to you.

Barely aspirated: "First, you can't prevent anything. Yes, I was taken from my home, I'm sure of that. I doubt my family would change how they live on your say-so. And if I'm already gone, you will try to sell them the crazy idea that I was taken by space bugs? If they don't suspect you of complicity in some horrible crime, they'll dismiss you as a lunatic."

But if you can be spared?

"I think I understand Bollum on time travel. Any change of the past runs behind me. Or in a parallel universe. The metaphor doesn't matter – it won't affect me here now. You may save Derek, though I doubt it, but even so it won't be me."

I remembered the explanation – time travel is like a tape recorder where the old recording is played just before it's overwritten. But that seems too simplistic. I mean, what if there are thousands of time travelers, all mixed up and overlapping each other. Doesn't that rewinding tape metaphor just fall apart, from the complexity if nothing else?

"You got me. It's really just the part about me that I care about. Unless one of your time travelers can take me back with them, you're all dead to me."

In a dream, Derek sees a younger him lying in his bed. He reaches down and touches the younger self to wake him and warn him. The universe dissolves in the white light of exploding paradox.

Another chance is given. Derek meets his mother before his conception, and tells her he's her child from the future and they have to move to Norway, above the Arctic Circle, and live off the grid and off the land. While she contemplates, his person begins to fade into impossibility. She believes she is going crazy, and does. His father divorces, childless.

But he hasn't given up, and the alien intelligence offers him one last opportunity. He wants to remake his chances by living the present, abandoning the future. He meets his mother as a young woman, convinces her not to get married so young, not to move to Copenhagen. She never meets his father; in fact, she falls in love with *him*. And one day Derek realizes – he is his own father. This contradiction cannot be unraveled, and he lives out his life knowing exactly what will happen to his son/self.

I thought about creating a website, "finddereksoresen.org." If I couldn't locate his family, perhaps they could locate me. Then I thought that I could bring it to the Keepers of the Light, that they might be willing to help me look. We would have every reason to cooperate at first, though by the end our interests would be orthogonal: My goal would be to undo the shackle that is his fate; theirs would be to prepare him for his communication with Bollum.

Turning to the press was another alternative. Talk to Barry Moore? If he would listen to me, he might get a kick out of this situation and might even offer to help. I had no illusions, though. If he did, it would be to get the story of my mental collapse. He had no sympathy for my sci-fi tendencies or the story I had outlined at the Sasquatch conference. Distractions, he said.

And Barbara Hohenstauffen? What would she say about this? I knew that I was next to nothing for her. I googled her, and if you think this is all made up, you'll probably guess what I found... Jerry Brook and Barbara Hohenstauffen, pictured and quoted on the *Dark Knight: Are You Prepared?* blog, in a year-old entry entitled, "The Forests Are Speaking to Us." No mention of the bog monster or me, fortunately. Barbara is quoted as saying: "We have to give voice to Gaia. Our society's artificial noise

and light have dulled our senses, drowning out her voice and her glow. She is telling us what we need to do, insistently, but how many of us can make out the message? Nature's rhythm is dark and light, one after the other. The more we fight against the darkness the more ferociously it will come back. We cannot hold it back, we must embrace the dark."

That read more like Jerry than Barbara, but the photo did me in. She looked as attractive as ever, but it saddened me to see her smiling in front of a hamming group of dark knights. I picked out one who seemed to be the pilot-glassed knight who had tailed me.

Derek and Click-Cluck eventually hit the jackpot. A major tunnel collapsed. It took Derek two days to map out the extent of the devastation, but then it was clear that the best solution was, indeed, to dig out the collapse. With the high ceiling and need to dig out the walls to find more stable rock, it would become a perfect location for a market. Derek was feted when the work was completed. Their boss paid them out rather than string them along for periodic payments, like the rest of the crew. Derek suspected there was some emotion driving the boss's generosity, but he still couldn't recognize bug infatuation if it stared him in the face.

They spent a couple days relaxing, a couple more preparing, and then they were ready to find the historian. They made no secret of that – Click-Cluck said it was smarter than suddenly picking up and heading who knows where – but her plan had its own costs. The morning of their departure they were attacked.

It began strangely. Derek was waiting while Click-Cluck fussed over how to pack their few belongings. Bugs carry everything in the concave hollow of their leathery backs. While walking, it's all inaccessible; the bug must lie on the belly and turn up one or more double-jointed limb to grab the contents. This is a moment of no little inconvenience and vulnerability, so most bugs want to be sure of how the contents will travel. That can take some trial and error, including a somewhat comical jump and jerk movement. Derek knew better than to interrupt. He felt like he should be doing something, too, but he wasn't carrying anything and he generally wasn't the one who tidied their quarters.

He saw a bug standing at the entrance to their dwelling. Usually bugs started clicking before you saw them, a courtesy and a way of avoiding misunderstandings. Conflicts were not unknown, although this was a remarkably non-violent society for being as close to anarchy as it was, no doubt because a sizeable part of its population had matured in a global peace-loving society. Then there was the ruling class conspiracy to keep this society in check. True anarchists and violent criminals were likely not tolerated.

The bug was burly, the kind Derek had seen with Thunk, Click-Cluck's old boss, the xenobiology critic: a thug bug, with large scarred and sinewy limbs and deep scratches and cuts in his hide, his body disc almost twice Click-Cluck's in thickness. He had short but apparently functional antennae. Click-Cluck had already noticed, alerted no doubt by hers. The bug dropped and reversed his limbs to reach up into his concave back, perhaps to retrieve a gun or weapon. Click-Cluck charged him at a speed Derek had never seen from her before. I don't know why the thug didn't show up in the door with the weapon drawn, as awkward as that would be, but perhaps this was all part of the conspiracy's caution. Assassination, sure, but no parading of it. Or perhaps they were simply too self-assured.

The thug had something in his hand and was restoring his joint so he could point it when Click-Cluck collided with him, the side of her disc body hitting right above the black orbs of his eyes. I think she grabbed the device with her small facial hand while her limbs twisted to intercede. That's when another bug bolted into the room. He, too, had been unseen and unheard. He walked up and right over the thug, who was considerably larger than him, and then clambered over Click-Cluck. He turned to grab her from behind. Derek had just a moment before Click-Cluck was neutralized and perhaps killed. He leapt.

He landed with a thud on the bug's back. The limbs didn't give way, but the shock stopped any action on the bug's part. Derek grabbed the antennae, thinking of breaking them, but they were way too sturdy. They continued to undulate rapidly, despite his efforts. The bug then dropped to his belly and raised all four limbs to drag Derek off – or maybe tear him apart, certainly not beyond a bug's capabilities. Derek realized this could be his end, but he didn't want to go out passively. He threw his upper body over the front of the bug – the antennae dug into the sides of his chest – and with balled fists bashed both of the bug's eyes.

One of them gave way, shattering like safety glass and releasing here and there a black, viscous liquid. The bug didn't make a sound at first, perhaps victim of the pain or shock. Then the little black arms started jerking in short spasms and a low moan came from deep within the creature's chest. No clicking and no screeching. The other limbs were motionless for a couple seconds, then began their ascent again. The two at the far end had Derek's legs and the other two seemed to be searching for the best hold on his arms. The little arms were positioned to protect the eyes from another assault. Derek grabbed each miniature hand and with all his reinforced strength twisted the one over the other and shoved and pulled with all his might and weight. One or the other cracked, and both lost any resistance to him.

The moaning changed in tone, as if the pain had gone above what a still rational mind might register into general agony. The two groping hands at his sides lost their initiative. Derek took the moment to look at Click-Cluck. She was on the ground, big-arm wrestling with the thug for possession of something quite similar to a handgun. Derek realized it had been firing – fortunately to the side of him, but still in his general direction. It was hard to say what was whizzing by, but it had the sound of lethality.

He didn't want to leave this bug able to continue the assault, but he also didn't want to brutalize needlessly – especially since any moment the shots could come directly at him. He pushed himself back and up, putting his weight on the arms for emphasis and then did a two-arm hammer with his fists into the bug's upper facial area, where he had seen Click-Cluck hit the other bug. At that point, he was able to free his legs of the bug's hind limbs and charged forward, taking flight by leaping off a foot on the bug's forehead. He landed with both knees hitting just above the thug's forehead, missing Click-Cluck by inches. As part of the landing he fell forward and rolled. The momentum carried him clean off the bug. Landing on his back, he lost all sense of control and lay sprawled on the ground, half into the hallway.

From that position he couldn't tell what was happening, except that he heard projectiles enter a substance softer than rock. Thwap thwap thwap. He wondered if he would feel the burn of these projectiles in his feet or legs in just a moment. More shots? He started to get up. Thwap thwap thwap. Oh God, he thought. Click-Cluck is dead now, and I'm next. He sat up. Aim for the heart, please.

That's when Click-Cluck stood up from behind the thug. She did not show the gun, but there was no question what happened. Just seconds before he had been lazing and feeling useless, and she was putzing about. Now, inexplicably alive, they were desperados and killers.

How do you walk away from a just but unsanctioned killing? Quickly, to be sure, but not so quickly as to draw attention. Maybe you resist the temptation to look down your front side for splatters of blood, maybe you don't. You know you can't control the shaking of your hands, so you are careful not to raise them. And you want to shout, to clear your lungs of the blood-and-gore mist that wafted from the dead. So I imagine. Click-Cluck padded away as if nothing happened. When Derek tried to engage her, she said quickly: "They may choose to keep the attack secret. But we must be careful about what we say."

Derek was dumbfounded – much closer to my reaction than hers. Every second he expected a troop of thugs to come around a curve, or a series of bangs around Click-Cluck and him that would presage their burial under tons of rock and debris. The feeling of impending doom stayed with him for an hour,

until the fatigue got the better of him, and thereafter he did his best to relax. If these were his last hours, he thought, let them be good ones.

Click-Cluck was adamant about making progress. They stopped once to eat. They got a special glop at a market – it still tasted like nothing, but there was something in it that chemically relaxed Derek. The effect was more than Click-Cluck intended: Derek kept trying to grab her little arms to share his thoughts about that morning. She told him to leave her alone, and wandered back to the market. He lay on his back and thought about her reluctance and all that he shared with her. She could at least show a little gratitude. Almost as soon as he thought it, he visualized the bug's twisted arms beneath his hands and could hear the agonized cry.

When he heard Click-Cluck's distinctive clicking, he opened his eyes and realized that he had slept. 'We're leaving,' she said.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She did not reply, but her bug voice resounded in his mind: There is no need to apologize because the concept is meaningless here.

They did not stop that day until very late, and then they were both exhausted from their daylong plodding. They did touch hands to arms, mostly out of habit, but just pressed out "good night." Derek slept very soundly that night because of his physical and mental exhaustion. Click-Cluck did her best to stay awake, but she, too, slept deeply. (I could hear through Derek both the labored breathing of her struggling consciousness and the even, almost snoring that followed in sleep.) When they awoke, simultaneously and at a time they might have gotten ready for work, they spent an inordinate amount of time looking around. We were completely vulnerable, Derek thought. Why are we still alive? What are they planning for us?

'We don't have far to go,' said Click-Cluck.

"The historian is near here?"

'No,' she said. 'This is where we will meet our guide.'

"And the guide will take us to the historian?"

'I don't know. I have confidence that we will see him.'

They followed a tunnel that got smaller and smaller, until it ended in a single dwelling. They sat down and waited. Derek fell asleep again. After a number of hours they heard someone padding noisily down the tunnel. Derek was awake by then, and looked at Click-Cluck for some signal of concern. She did not move, and her antennae were too short to give a signal of anything. Derek got on all fours from his position leaning against the wall; his feet were squared against the vertical surface to aid in acceleration.

The clicks began at a short distance, and Click-Cluck answered. Derek understood that the bug was describing its purpose for visiting them, but he couldn't make out the description. Was he a guide? An acolyte? An assistant? Derek wasn't sure of the word.

The bug was small enough to be a female. She had no antennae, but also had none of the scratches and divots that Derek saw throughout this social order. Click-Cluck and their guide discussed the historian for a minute before they all started back the way they had come. They walked for a half hour or so, and then abruptly turned around and walked the same way they had come. Half way back to their origin point, they turned to the left into a small passageway. After crawling through, they waited in silence for five minutes. Just as suddenly the guide started them down a steep tunnel that soon had a small dribble of water flowing down the middle of it. They stopped at the end of the incline. The bug said: 'Stay here. Make yourselves comfortable. You will continue tomorrow.'

She started back up the incline slowly. Click-Cluck did a quick shhhhhh movement with her small hand to preempt Derek from starting any discussion. They entered a nearby dwelling, and ate their glop in silence. Derek wasn't sure what to do because this day was shorter than their usual and he had plenty of energy left. This glop had the same relaxant as the day before, and it eventually made him unbearably

sleepy. They lay down; as Derek started to nod off, Click-Cluck tapped an explanation. They would have a few guides, each one trained to detect and avoid being followed. The protocol was not designed to hide the historian from the ruling class, but from the society in which he lived. There had been a number of attempts on his life in the delusional hope that those in power would redeem the bug responsible for his death. Others were drawn to plead their case to him, ask for help, or beg for rehabilitation. For those in power, on the other hand, he lived in the open, as a challenge to sanitize their world – finally and completely – of its history.

The other mystery began to unravel about the same time. Doreen and I were discussing calendars and something about Brett's schedule – he was helping with the school's musical, making the set or something similar – things were not going so well with Amelia at the moment and the show popped up as something to keep him occupied. Doreen: "I won't be able to make dinner before the performance because I've got a reception." "What?" I asked, piqued. "It's the same reception I go to every year, John. The annual Triangle Psychology Professionals reception. Just a professional organization I belong to." "Really? I don't remember them. What's it for? A research organization? A certifying organization?" "Nothing so formal. It's an organization of peers. A chance to get together and share experiences." "Mentoring? That kind of thing?" I said. "Yes," she replied, her brow twisting into a question of where this was going. Innocent enough reaction. "Okay," I said.

We had moved on and were discussing another evening when I said: "I'd like to go, too."

"Go where?"

"To your professional reception. Is it open to spouses?"

"You want to attend the reception? Mingle with human resource professionals, psychologists and mental health professionals?"

"Well," I said with a wry-ish smile, "I have come to know quite a few. Mental health types, anyway."

She looked at me with some exasperation. If she suspected my motivation, she was able to hide it. "Are you afraid I'll skip the performance? Leave you to man the fort, or whatever?"

"Not at all," I said. "I just think I should show a bit more interest in what you do. This seems like an opportunity."

"All right," she said, marking her calendar. "Some spouses come. The odd trophy wife and house husband. Sure." She gazed at her calendar while her face became increasingly pent up. Finally she realized why. "Look, John," she said, "let's take two cars. I don't want to feel pressured to leave when you feel neglected or ignored."

"Absolutely. I don't want to be a burden. Can we at least show up together?"

"I'll call you," she said, "when I leave the office."

"Great."

"One other thing. Don't imagine the buffet will replace dinner. It's meager at best."

The historian was an old bug. His hide had no green hue and was as dark as a well-oiled baseball mitt. Scratches ran deep, and some areas were splotched in ways that Derek had not otherwise seen. The bug had short antennae – Click-Cluck's and newly installed, as it turned out – that undulated with an unusual rapidity and consistency, as if perforce in sync with a thousand others'. The bug spoke to Click-Cluck with overlapping clicks that were inscrutable to Derek.

"Can you speak more slowly?" Derek ventured to say. There was no response and no change in tempo. He was ready to touch Click-Cluck's side in an effort to get her attention when she turned to him and said in her own barely discernible English (showing off?): "The historian welcomes us to his home. He will be happy to answer our questions, and he has many for us. He believes we are safe here, at least

for now. Whoever arranged the attack will be more cautious now that we are here. We are more likely to end up under a fallen tunnel in the course of our excavation work, than anything else.”

“That’s reassuring, I guess. Does he know who attacked us?”

In Bug: ‘The assailants are unknown and unimportant. Nothing about them would tell us why we were attacked and who arranged it. They were probably decoys.’

“Decoys?”

‘To make us less vigilant against other forms of attack or insinuation, perhaps. Or just to scare us.’

That opened the possibility that they had used deadly force needlessly. Derek felt the urge to change the topic: “They knew we were leaving. Why was that a problem all of a sudden? Because of the historian? Or did they figure out our code?”

Click-Cluck didn’t reply.

Then she said: ‘They probably know everything about us.’ Pause. ‘Including our code. Speculating about motivations won’t get us far. But the historian has been telling me more about the ruling class. I will explain once he has finished. Please wait.’

Silence while they communicated via antennae for two, five, ten, twenty, forty minutes. Derek lay resting and even fell asleep. He woke up when Click-Cluck touched him lightly with her face hand. She waited until he sat up and said he was ready. ‘As you know, our written history begins 25,000 years ago, with the founding of our global society. Everything prior we know only from chronicles composed in our own era. Museums contain artifacts from before the founding, but anything written was lost or destroyed. The historian’s work shows that we lack perspective on the distant past. We know only of the internecine conflicts and ineffective societies. More likely, he says, they were conflict-ridden, but functional societies that were forcibly replaced by a more powerful and even more effective social order. Not everything changed. Factions existed before the world order, and they continue under this order. This is not surprising in itself: Everyone knows that the ruling class has several factions and shifting coalitions. Just observing their deliberations and their interactions would lead you to that conclusion. But these factions do not only compete in the open against each other.’

Derek waited for Click-Cluck to qualify that statement or even take it back. Or maybe for lightning to strike. None of which happened. She went on: ‘As I have told you, Derek, our society has no concept of privacy. Every action is judged by the social good it produces. But at the very pinnacle of our social order, there is a fundamental disagreement about what constitutes social good, and therefore conflict about how to maintain and promote that order. Most in the ruling class agree that our social order needs a safety valve, like the place we live in now, a place for those who would contaminate the social good in society. This was one secret that we have all known, to one degree or another. But the historian has told me other truths about the ruling class, which I myself have not known until now.’ She paused for several seconds.

‘The ruling class violates its own precepts about bug life. Our life expectancy is about 250 years, as you know. Apparently the elite of the ruling class has always disregarded this limit. The most powerful members of various factions have used secret technologies to maintain their bodies for many hundreds of years. The historian himself is a beneficiary of this technology, from his years in the ruling class. He is a thousand years old.’

Derek and I both realized that this admission might explain better than any other why he had not been silenced.

‘There was a hidden motivation for our exploration of space. The directive to bring back species from other inhabited planets came not from an interest in xenobiology, however much the ruling class sold it as such. There was a faction that hoped that an alien society would have a record – from visits to our planet or emissions from it – of what our earlier societies were like. They hoped that insights from the past would enable us to improve our current social order. The truth will set you free, I think

earthlings would say. Unfortunately, our space travelers found no planet with advanced enough life that could mirror back to us what we had been.

‘The anti-xenobiology movement was a response by a faction that rejects change. More recently, the historian says, another faction engaged a different plan to cause change. What if we force change by re-introducing religion?’ Click-Cluck stopped to allow Derek a moment to absorb that, or maybe because of another communication from the historian. ‘The plan included seeding a number of young bugs with special antennae that made them susceptible to manipulation. In my case...’ Click-Cluck stopped again, and Derek sensed emotion. ‘In my case, I was prepared for my encounter with you, to absorb your culture and your society’s propensity for belief in a deity. – Then I was given to believe I was a messenger for our own God.’

Derek didn’t know what to say, whether to comfort her or to let her work out the revelation on her own. He wanted to touch her little arm, but then he could hear once again the crack of the attacker’s arm and saw her in his mind recoiling from him.

‘There are other things,’ she said suddenly. ‘We have discussed our language and the transformation of verbal constructions. The historian believes that the verbal shift took place within a few hundred years of the transition to our world society. This place began drifting back toward the use of verbal forms about a thousand years ago, according to the few records he could find. These verbal forms are probably wrong, historically, but they have flourished here. Given that and other signs, he believes that this place of refuge is little older than a millennium. And if that is true, it coincided with the rise in power of the ruling class’s most conservative faction. It is rumored in some inner circles, although the historian remains unconvinced, that the leader of this faction is a founding member of the ruling elite, as old as our society itself. The historian was banished here a hundred years ago, and has spent that time researching and developing a history of our world, both before and after the transition. He assumed he would be eliminated, but he is tolerated as a source of information and insight used by all factions. Some others, not yet banished, have tried to do the same, only to end up here – and even so they are all dead now. Only the historian remains alive, because, as he believes, he is scrupulously indifferent to anyone’s interests.’

Click-Cluck paused again – did Derek hear something like a sigh? – then went on: ‘The historian has much to say about the development and distribution of my antennae. All the factions have been using specialized antennae for internal communications, probably for as long as our world order has existed. Ruling-class antennae bear many common elements of technology, so the historian has concluded that the technology was invented once and spread. Most likely, one faction introduced the two-way antennae and let all factions use them, but hid within them the ability to eavesdrop on the others. Over time, this would have become obvious and the other factions learned to produce their own antennae.’

‘My antennae share the same measures for secrecy as those produced by the faction that was responsible for space exploration. We can call them the xeno-faction. However, the language modifications came from a different manufacturing source. The historian believes that there is either a faction within the faction, or a new faction, that believes that religion, not history, provides the best way to break the current stalemate. Not much else is known about this group, except that the historian has been queried several times by members of the ruling class about the history of religions on our planet. The inquirers may be members who are reacting to this plot or may be members of the plot. The historian doesn’t talk about his interactions with the ruling class, although, as he tells everyone who contacts him, he takes no measures to keep his secrets secret. So these members are likely known to all in the ruling class.’

When Cluck-Cluck stopped, Derek asked: “So – the ruling class can see this plot developing, like a slow motion counter-punch? I’m confused. Either secrecy is important or it isn’t.”

‘Secrecy,’ Click-Cluck answered, ‘is always relative. If a slow-motion attack looks like a feint for something else, the defender might actually prefer not to know. Once the alternatives proliferate, you

can only prepare yourself so well before you are squandering your resources trying to anticipate all of them.’

“But some alternatives are worse than others, right? I imagine a return of religion would be seen by some as a virus that could affect the health of the whole body politic.”

‘A return of religion could also reenergize the whole society.’

“Sure,” Derek said. He had a response, but just let it drop. He asked his own question: “What about forbidden technologies? What if they were shared more broadly with the population? Couldn’t that have the same effect? Life extending technology – or maybe artificial intelligence or something like that.”

“erteghel engerrgnz?” asked Click-Cluck.

“Yes, computers that can think. Suppose they even presented a way to become immortal? A place to download your consciousness...”

Click-Cluck thought about that, or communicated with the historian, then said: ‘We do not believe that any computer could adequately hold our consciousness.’

“Then you don’t think that the ruling class has a technology like that, squirreled away somewhere? What about unlimited energy? That might be just the thing to bring about the change in computing power.”

‘We have all the energy we need,’ she replied.

“But without limit. No boundaries. That might change everything. What if that was possible?”

‘The universe is full of energy as is.’

“But not packaged, not controlled. What if you could put unlimited energy toward the question of what to do with energy. A spiral upward.”

There was no answer. Still, Derek felt better having spoken, felt as if he had joined a dance with Click-Cluck and the historian, balanced between secrecy and honesty, a wallflower no more.

I used the pre-paid mobile phone to contact the Keepers of the Light. I had kept the phone off until today, and there were several messages for me. When I called, a raspy male voice answered – the kind of voice you might have after a loud party or a hotly contested game, but the way he spoke through the rasp made me think it was his normal condition. I explained who I was, but he said, “I know who you are.”

“I am calling to let you know that I won’t be able to help you in any meaningful way.”

“Why not, Mr. Densch?”

“In truth, I have nothing to say about Bollum. I’m trying to move beyond all that.”

“Move beyond? Are you going to say that it never happened? Or are you afraid to think about what it means?”

“I would rather not think about it at all.”

“You’re afraid. I understand.”

“I’m not afraid.” I felt compelled to respond, even though drawing me out was exactly what he wanted.

“All right. Sure. – I do have another message for you, though.”

“What?”

“You remember the message about Henry.”

My stomach fell. Of course, I remembered when he reminded me; I had chosen not to think about it. But I needed to cut this off – for both Doreen and Brett. “Sure. Not that it was all that meaningful.”

“Then maybe this won’t be either. Don’t forget about Bridget. That’s the message.”

“God damn it,” I said, unable to think. “Jesus.”

“Someone you know?”

“No,” I replied.

“Someone – from your past?”

I couldn't hold back any more. "Not my past. I mean, Jesus, I believe I met an ancestor in a hypnotic regression session whose name was Brigitte. And it was there that I met Heinrich – Henry. I lived his life for a raft of sessions."

"So – maybe you will reconsider?"

"You don't need me," I averred.

"On the contrary, Mr. Densch. We believe that you are the key. You have made contact again with the voice you call Bollum, the Light Keeper, haven't you? You are in regular contact, maybe?"

"No," I said. "Not regular at all. I thought I –" In that instant I recognized that what he knew could easily have come from Meg. "I had a vision of him lately. Yes. But I haven't seen him since."

He was silent. I had a vision of him scribbling and passing a note to someone.

"Let me ask you a question," I said.

"Please do."

"Does the name Derek Sorensen mean anything to you?"

"Only from your text," he replied.

"Okay."

Then with a mischievous tone: "Most of us know him as Eric Sanders."

He managed to shock me again. "You have heard his story, too?" I had to ask, even if any answer was tainted and couldn't be trusted.

"We've all heard it, Mr. Densch. Not everyone has heard the story directly from the Light Keeper, but we share stories. You will be surprised at the consistencies and learn, as we all do, from the inconsistencies. It is a wonderful way to unburden yourself and learn more. We share so much. Don't be too quick to give up on us." He paused. "I know you have been followed, and the dark knights can be unpleasant. We won't ask you to do anything that will raise your profile or put your family at risk. If your family has asked you to give up on this – I understand. That is difficult to ignore. But please consider the stakes, and how this could affect every human on earth. We are on the cusp of the most important age in human history. Please consider that before you turn away."

"All right," I said. "I will think about it some more."

Then I had to ask: "Have you looked for Eric Sanders?"

"We investigated a bit, but there are 68,000 Sanders families in this country alone."

"Have you tried a website?" I asked sheepishly.

That did not go as planned, but at least I'd done what I said I would. Another contact would be necessary, sure, but then I would end things once and for all. After a pledge of secrecy, the voice told me a number of other things about the Society, and left it for me to take up contact again with them. The Society, he said, had roots going back into the Enlightenment and its often forgotten mysticism. "Illuminati," he said with finality. The Society's modern founders emerged in the late 19th and early 20th Century. "When rationality had progressed enough that individuals could hear a voice in their heads and not immediately ascribe it to angels, spirits or insanity." Once a small number of individuals had shared their common stories of the Light Keeper, they and their family members re-founded the Society. Their first priority was record keeping. Somewhere the Society keeps a genealogy of everyone who has had contact with the Light Keeper. "In case they could discern a pattern: certain families, bloodlines, something like that." But generations of field research revealed only randomness.

Two days passed and then we received a late evening call. No one picked up; I could hear Dr. Kurowitz leaving a message about some new result that he discovered in reviewing the video. Would I be available for coffee? My mind jumped to illness, disease, cancer. I called back and we agreed to meet next evening in the Caribou Coffee at the corner of Franklin and Estes. He assured me that the news was not bad, but he wouldn't say anything else. "I want to be able to look you in the eye," he said. "It's important that we understand each other."

The building was a former bank, with the drive-through lanes still intact. The interior had been gutted, and its raw-wood interior walls now had a decidedly college town feel. I got there first and ordered a decaf latte, though I had this strange feeling that this place was a time warp from my past, and I should really order a caffeinated double cappuccino, no matter what that might do to my sleep.

When Kurowitz arrived, he stopped at the door and surveyed the whole interior. I'm sure he saw me immediately but he didn't acknowledge my wave. Maybe he wanted to see if there was a student or someone else he should greet? A couple of them had been eyeballing me, wondering what I was doing there, no laptop, tablet, book or conversation.

After his visual survey, he marched with determination to the counter. He ordered a mocha drink of some kind and stood by the steaming machine until his order was ready. I was incredulous and not a little peeved.

"John Densch," he said as he sat down, looking at me for the first time.

"Dr. Kurowitz," I replied, assuming he was greeting me with those words. I immediately regretted the deference, but realized I couldn't remember his first name. It did finally come to me: William.

He looked momentarily down at his drink – he had removed the lid and exposed the abundance of foam. He had the expression of a teacher or counselor, I thought, someone searching for the right words both to admonish and to encourage.

"The world is not what we think it is, John." He looked up and stared into my eyes.

I assumed he would want to take a run at whatever he had on his mind, but this seemed a bit too far afield. "Is that supposed to be an epistemological critique?" I asked.

"Yes, it is. Epistemological, phenomenological – existential." He sighed. "But we don't live in a philosophical age, and we don't live in a reflective society. We believe we are a numbers-driven society, without even understanding what numbers mean. We are, in fact, constitutionally averse to seeing what these numbers have to tell us." He nodded as if to himself. "The rational worldview, the belief in order and predictability, breaks apart under the weight of its own self-importance. We imagine that when someone tells us that a particular cancer is terminal or that a drug cures an illness, or that Americans really want one politician over another, or that the earth is warming, or that Afghans want Americans out of their country, we are confronted with simple truth. The truth, the real truth, lies elsewhere, while we are gloat over these baby answers to our baby questions, our babble responses to babble questions."

He motioned to intercept my questions. "The numbers, Densch. They tell of a churning, self-consuming world, a world completely alien in its uncertainty and otherness." Then he changed registers, lightened up in tone and demeanor. "Consider the concept 'statistically significant.' As you know, significance means that we have a certain level of confidence in the story that the numbers are telling. The actual level of uncertainty may be 5%, 1% or even less – arbitrary levels that we accept as gold standards. Just for the sake of illustration, let's take 5% as the significance level. That means that there is at most a one-in-twenty chance that the conclusion is invalid. But generally we still feel pretty good about any such conclusion. We won't be contradicted very often – maximally one in twenty times, but probably, we feel intuitively, less often. We believe in our methodologies – the statistics are just a check, a worst case, a rational security blanket.

"But let's look more closely, shall we. It's easiest to start small. If we have four events during one period, and our explanation of each event has a one in four chance of being wrong, what is the chance that we will encounter a single wrong explanation? One in four you say? Count again! We are saying that three of four outcomes are compatible with the explanatory story. Our four events would have four to the fourth power, or 256, outcome combinations. But if we exclude all *wrong* explanations, because we only want the case where we see valid explanations, we have three to the fourth power, or 81, total possibilities. That means that the chance of running into at least one wrong explanation is 256 minus 81, divided by 256, or 68%. We're surprised by at least one incorrect conclusion *two thirds of the time*, not one quarter.

“To put that into a larger context, let us say we have twenty measured events each day, each with a 95% probability of the predicted outcome. Using the same logic and math as before, the possibility of *no outcome* being unexplained is not 19 in 20, but just 1 in 3, about 36%. It is crucial that you see this correctly. Two out of three of these days, we can expect to be surprised by an event that is simply not explained by our rationality. The probability of *multiple* explanations being wrong is quite large as well.

“So why all this abstract math? We normally use numbers to reassure ourselves that we are rational beings in a rational world, but the numbers themselves would wake us up to a very different reality. The irrational and unthinkable are not simply theoretical – the flood of the unknown is never ending, there to confound and confuse and threaten us. Our order that seems so sturdy and grounded is at best just a step from chaos. To truly understand the world, we must embrace that chaos, accept it, and act upon it.”

Kurowitz had sketched some of these numbers on a folded sheet he pulled from his jacket and pushed the sheet in front of me. He waited a moment while I glanced over them.

“But we can attack this same problem without the abstractions. Let’s look at this as a human moral and ethical problem, too,” he said. “Can you tell me how many genocides have been perpetrated during the time you have lived on this planet? Do you know how many people starve to death and succumb to the most treatable diseases in a single year? Can you guess the number of assaults, rapes and murders each minute of the day, every day of the year on this planet? Now ask yourself: how can this world make sense, when the *sense* and *purpose* of human existence is constantly falling apart at the margins? Can you *just ignore* these constant lapses in a rational order, these intrusions in our rational self-assurance? Is it sufficient that we say, well, my life makes sense so life *writ large* must make sense, too? Or do we call such suffering *inexplicable* and wait for an explanation in the afterlife? Can you be satisfied with those atrophied explanations for all that happens just beyond normalcy, John?”

By now I knew where this was going. I realized that I had incorrectly accused Meg about ratting me out to the Society, at least for the Brigitte story. But because Kurowitz couldn’t have supplied the Heinrich reference – I met him only after that conversation – something still begged for an explanation.

He nodded as he saw recognition in my eyes. “We need new eyes to look at our world, at what is at stake *and* what can be achieved. The suffering that humanity knows doesn’t have to be, John, shouldn’t be accepted as *human*. It is an artifact of scarcity, a consequence of a slow, arduous evolution. Natural life is an extraordinary, miraculous process, but wasteful beyond human comprehension, much more destructive than our rationalist positivity lets us comprehend. There is another way to conceive of the human condition, and it can only come through unlimited energy. We do not need all the mixing, matching, failure and tearing down of natural evolution. We can create a directed order, a new evolutionary path, based upon *abundance*. An order that does not require that anything be lost. No one need suffer, because no one need struggle.”

“What makes you believe,” I said, “that the lack of a lack means no more suffering? I think human history shows that outpourings of violence don’t necessarily correlate with the amount of suffering endured.”

“A certain faith in the mind is required. Yes, desire and conflict seem universal. But ours is a productive faith –”

“In the same way that Marx’s faith in communism was a productive faith?”

“He was only wrong about the point at which mutual interest overwhelms individual desire.”

I interjected on his last word, though he may have been finished anyway: “Why does this have to involve me? You all have contact with Bollum or the Light Keeper or whatever you call him. And it’s coming, no matter what we do, right? What is all this intrigue about?”

He put up his hand in a dramatic gesture of conceding the point. “The intrigue and drama are a distraction, I will grant you that, John. We have every reason to believe that the transition is inevitable, one way or another. The dark knights and their ilk are just not a credible force to stop the future. But – the Keepers of the Light have come to realize something. You would normally not be expected to

comprehend this until after you had had more time with the Society. But we do not have a lot of time, so we need you to understand our point of view.

“Your recent encounter with Bollum has already hollowed out the normalcy of this world for you, right? No explanation that existed prior to that contact is sufficient any more, because we now have new possible explanations for almost everything – every event, theory, religion or philosophy. Our statistics, under-achieving as they are, need a whole new understanding for error terms – for the huge range of possibilities that we are simply unable to calculate, for all that we *can* and *must* anticipate their existence.

“As you may have realized yourself, we need to apply that same caution to understanding our contact. We have to assume the being we call the Light Keeper is completely alien to us. In fact, a being of his complexity likely wouldn’t want to be honest with us, either because he believes us incapable of using the truth appropriately or because he has an agenda that would exceed our understanding. A being such as he is not human in any sense we understand: our intelligence, our emotions, our values. We want to believe him ethical, but his ethics may be as incomprehensible to us as ours are to a dog or a cow or a hyena.

“We need to learn as much as we can to make the most informed decisions possible. The singularity is inevitable, but both its timing and its form are under considerable debate – not in the Society as a whole, but among the more reflective members.”

“The illuminati,” I mumbled incredulously.

“If you wish,” he said with a satisfied smile. “Your story of the Bug World has given some of us pause. Would it be possible for a social order to emerge that sought to prevent the singularity? Would a shortsighted notion of social good obscure the best alternative and prevent our further evolution? That was not something that we thought possible, especially given the ineffectiveness of the dark knights, but the Light Keeper seems to be telling us – through you – that it is possible.

“And by the way, we know that he is again communicating with you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I said. “I am not communicating with him. I seem to be tied to Derek Sorensen in some way, through Bollum. I dream his life almost every night, and he seems to be reliving it with me.”

“Of course,” he said. “But you need to open yourself to another possibility.”

“Which is?”

“There is no Derek Sorensen, or Eric Sanders.”

“Then – ”

“The Light Keeper. Remember that we cannot think of him as human, not as we know our species. One way to think of him, especially given how he has described his billion years, is as a boundless story weaver. We believe that he communicates through other lives as much as he does through words.”

Though the thought was anything but new to me, I hesitated before asking: “Has he shared lives with others like this?”

“Some,” he said. “Some of us have experienced past-life regression similar to yours.”

“But stories like Derek Sorensen’s?”

“There are a few who have told of a Sanders and some less similar names...” He paused. “The stories vary somewhat, but – I have to be honest with you, John – no one has described him just the way you have.”

“A lot of that is just my own elaboration, I’m sure.”

“Of course,” he said, looking at me. Implication: whatever I think I imagine is just implanted. Nothing more than a vessel for his message.

“So – the Derek story is a message to us on earth about how to bring about the singularity?”

“About how to avoid the crushing of this evolutionary branch. Dead-ends in evolution are not always warranted. Chance has a big role to play in nature’s wasteful game.”

I had a vision in my dreams that night: In a dark corner of space, a mile-by-mile-by-mile factory cube, with streams in and out of worker robots, as well as some organic creatures, moving great containers of organic consumables, all coming from planetoid spheres, connected to each via colossal tubing. Within the cube were giant halls, bright lights, protective suits and helmets for the organic creatures, as well as decontamination showers. The structure was one gigantic human factory: the functions of a human body teased out and grown into industrial proportions, staked down, bathed in waters from a fountain of youth, tended like a fine garden under hydroponic lights. Somewhere around the three-quarter mile mark, the gray matter began, a peat marsh of wrinkled stuff, interfaced at intervals with hanging dark boxes via what looked like fiber-optic cables. I walked to the end of the line and found disembodied eyes, pointed outward, each with a red line trailing back into shiny black pipes, arrayed toward a window wall, a mile-square matrix of them, each eye lying in its own dish of a yellowish substance. There were no lids. The eyes could never close.

Yet there was no exploding light. I went to a darkened observation deck, where I had to push aside some idled and de-powered robots. I lessened the light filter until I could see the distant stars clearly. There were dark patches among the star curtain, where massive structures waited for the bath of energy to return.

Something told me: To stop the flow of energy, he did not need to close his lids. He needed only close his mind.

At breakfast I was trying to take the conspiracy apart. Someone had alerted the Keepers of the Light, had given them the outlines of the Heinrich story. The suspects: Doreen, Brett, Amelia, Margaret, and Meg. The leak could be intentional or accidental, no way to tell. Doreen had probably told her confidant, but what are the odds that whoever had been advising her (an ex-lover to boot) was actually tied into this conspiracy? Brett and Amelia were belligerently antithetical to the Society. Meg was a true believer in the cosmic connection and probably not inclined to believe a science-fiction explanation for it. And Margaret was so serious about her profession that I doubted she would breathe a confidentiality-breaking word. That left me with nothing. Could it be that the Society wasn't tipped off at all, that Bollum *was* trying to convince me of his reality through them?

I was stumped. I could live, I thought, with the doubts in my own mind, but it burned that someone might be manipulating me. I wanted just one little piece of assurance to stand against, to push up from. I found myself dialing Barbara's number, a number that I apparently knew by heart. I got the answering machine for PsychEnergy. "Barbara, hi, this is John Densch. I hope you are well. Your family, too. I'd like to talk with you about – well, one of those ideas I had. I want to find someone. You called him fictional, and you were right, from every reasonable point of view. Now I'm not so sure. I guess I've gotten less reasonable. Can you give me a call back?" I gave my cell phone number.

Brett marched through the kitchen. "Hey Brett," I said, not moving at all to intercept. I didn't want to risk getting brushed off, and he sensed that and kept moving.

"I have a question. When you come back is fine."

He was three-quarters out the door when he turned around. "What, dad?" Full of generic impatience, as if he had had to wait for me so many times his mind half exploded when he heard me speak.

"Can you tell me something?"

A little headshake, as if to say, just get on with it.

"I'm trying to understand the visions I have been having. I've told you about the Heinrich stuff."

"Mom did." Get on with it.

"What I don't understand is how the Keepers of the Light people got a hold of that story. Do you have any idea?"

He looked at me. He seemed perturbed by the indirection around his allegiance to the dark knights. Or there could be a glimmer of guilt.

“I just thought I’d ask,” I said.

He seemed to be thinking. “That was a while ago, right?”

“Yes,” I said. “Quite a while ago now. Before we told anyone, really.”

“They’re resourceful. Maybe they recorded your sessions.”

“Like, bugging Meg’s office? Are you serious?”

“Hey, the Dark Knights weren’t the ones who sprang it on you. Believe what you want, Dad. Maybe it was just chance. Maybe someone just wanted to see you get sucked in.”

At which point my imagination took over, and I saw exactly how Doreen’s ex-lover had duped me, and engineered the whole thing.

Part 4

Derek felt like a fifth limb. He hadn't worried to begin with, but each day Click-Cluck spent more time with the historian and less time with him. When he tried to join them, they would speak too quickly for him to follow, or lie down on their bellies and be silent – communicating through their antennae. Click-Cluck explained some things to him, but since they had arrived the touching of the arms at night had ended, and so had their secrets. Now he felt like a prop; the two bugs were planning something in which, were he even a part, then as a decoy, a magician's distraction.

Derek had more freedom than ever before. They were at the very edge of the outcast area, and beyond it was a wasteland of half-collapsed tunnels, closed-off caverns and huge atriums created out of multiple collapsed levels of bug caves. Full of rubble and dust. There was life, too. A variety of creatures showed up in the light of glow sticks he was given to carry, mostly slobberers who lived off the ubiquitous slime, but also some small predators. The latter were leathery like the bugs and had four legs; most had rudimentary heads, although none had noticeable necks. Derek assumed that was a consequence of the gravity, but who knows, it may have been simple chance. There were also bat-like creatures roaming the large exposed areas.

Derek didn't often see the bug bats during his perambulations, but he absolutely never saw a bug person. Back in society he had visited museums and historical sites with lots of bugs, but he had never seen anything like a nature preserve or a wilderness area or a park where a bug might seek solitude or relaxation. Here, it might be understandable that bugs would shy away from places where they might disappear for whatever reason. But absolutely no one?

He thought at first that there might still be a top predator that he was unaware of. He expected Click-Cluck to tell him to stop going. But she responded that there were no dangerous predators, just: 'If you're going, be careful – we'll never find you.'

He began to wonder if earth still figured in her theology. Maybe he was more valuable to her as an absence than presence? That equation bothered him, but not as much as her visible indifference. It made him feel used, and what's worse – that he had misunderstood all along. She had come with him to this decaying society, not because she cared about his fate, but just to protect her own mission.

Derek fought back with sullenness, silence and acerbic responses. Given his general difficulties in communicating, this strategy was as ineffectual as you might imagine, but he didn't know how else to respond. I tried to talk to him as he sat in the largest cavern he had found, flaps of bug batwings echoing from above. "Derek," I said, "you need to focus on yourself. You are going to be better off back in bug society. Just tell them that you aren't part of Click-Cluck's parade any more. Don't talk sedition, and they'll be happy to take you back. Maybe it won't be so bad to have a steady diet of dung balls, either, should it come to that."

"Take a flying leap," he replied.

I was shocked that he responded. The attitude was less shocking.

"Then get out of my head," I said.

"Gladly. Just tell me how."

"Tell Bollum you don't need your story told."

"I never asked him to find you. Or anyone. He's got his own plan."

"Could you at least stop being a schmuck and letting everyone play you?"

"Ah, the kettle calls the pot black."

"It's different here."

"I'm sure it is. Quite different."

"Okay, I'll help us both out and get you excised ASAP."

“I think actually you’ll need an exorcist, or maybe a psychiatrist who believes in high-voltage shock therapy. Have fun with that.”

What worked for getting Click-Cluck’s attention were questions about the natural environment. She would patiently describe how the bugs and their slime had developed in a symbiotic relationship. The slime feasted on the organic volatiles exuded, redirected or collected in specially prepared caverns, and the bugs harvested the results. Slime existed in hundreds of species with numerous characteristics, although Derek could not distinguish any of them by taste or appearance. This was not a perpetual motion machine: the slime consumed minerals from the rock walls, and the caverns themselves naturally leaked organic compounds. The slime released oxygen as part of their metabolizing process. Without the slime, in fact, the atmosphere of this underground world would have long ago become unbreathable; without the bugs, the slime would never have flourished as it had.

One night, mumbling to himself, Derek told me this: “I know what you think you know about this place. As long as this loop exists, you can at least look more closely. Why do you ignore the life teeming in this corner of Bug World? It’s not all bug creatures and slime. There are insects – real bugs – and spider-like creatures, the occasional snake and some kind of rat-like creature. The insects have a random number of body sections and tend to look more like short centipedes. The spiders have six legs and are mostly ambulatory. The snakes aren’t scaly and they seem to move more by scooching than slithering. Their skin looks like the bug creature’s fore arms, which makes me wonder if there is some kind of bizarre relationship there. The insects and spiders all have pigmentation, but have no eyes, just antennae. Why the camouflaging color, then? It can only be because they co-evolved with predators who can see, probably the bug creatures, who at one time may have had them in their diet. This is a fairly closed system here, but a functioning one.”

Bugs and their predecessors evolved from their world’s dinosaur equivalent, creatures that looked like reptiles in various ways, lumbering, instinctual, and very successful. The siphoning of water into the atmosphere and off into space, along with the actions of the remaining organics underground, had created giant cave systems in which life evolved along parallel tracks. Evolution was able to mix things up occasionally through passageways that tectonics opened and closed. The reptile age was probably the planet’s most successful for life forms, but it was also extraordinarily brutal. Birthrates more than survival techniques determined the evolutionary winners. Eventually a different kind of adaptation arose, a proto-bug, with the ability to manipulate the environment. They could collapse caves to separate themselves from predators; they prepared caverns for slime growth; and they cooperated in their defense. That led to greater emphasis on survival than birth, and growing intelligence.

Derek: “Of course, some bugs think that this drive for manipulating the environment even expresses itself in biology, in the fact that their species selects gender well after birth. Others consider that simply a necessary adaptation for survival under extreme circumstances.”

Although he could not follow the distinctions among creatures who all looked more or less like modern bugs (though without the fore arms, until some point in their socially conditioned evolution), bug archaeology was able to show a large variety of species in different locations and times. Eventually, interaction among distinct cave systems subsumed the differences, although it is not hard to imagine that the preponderant group eliminated any lingering difference with sudden and brutal finality.

When the historian came and found Derek in one of his dark hiding places, no one could have been more surprised. Derek’s first reaction was to tense up, thinking that only one of them would return to Click-Cluck. But the historian flopped onto his belly next to him and relaxed his limbs. There was silence while Derek unwound.

The historian spoke slowly and concisely so that Derek could mostly understand: ‘Our species did have a few predators for much of our million years of existence. There are endless carcasses and

skeletons that prove it, although most of these get carried to the surface for disposal. One such predator did have long limbs like yours, not an upright creature, but one well suited for attacking from above. Its favored means of attack was a single elongated tooth that it plunged into the bug's face above the eyes. The attack on the brain immobilized the prey but didn't always kill it. The predator would then tear off all the limbs, leaving its prey completely defenseless, whether or not it recovered its senses. Finally the attacker would flip the bug over and slice it open from the mouth to the genitalia using the serrated front edge of the tooth. We believe that a bug could survive this assault until its heart or lungs were yanked out, although depending on the immobilizing strike, the bug may or may not have felt anything.'

'A horrible way to die.'

'On the contrary,' he replied. 'That was a death with meaning.'

'Meaning?'

'A cycle with meaning, let us say. Nature in balance.'

'So you would say that your society is no longer in balance with nature?'

'A mono-species culture is by definition no longer in balance.'

'And you wish to return to nature?'

'Not at all, earthling. It is an observation. The consequences I draw from that are quite different than yours.'

'What then?'

'We must seek our own balance, but it must be a productive, striving balance. Sometimes a violent balance.'

'Is that why the ruling class keeps you around? Because you are an advocate for its factional struggles?'

'Perhaps. Any one leader could decide that I am no longer useful, although if it is only one then there are risks. For all of them to come together to decide to end my life, well, they would have also ended the reason for my existence.'

'You exist to foster strife?'

'You express yourself well – better than Click-Cluck thinks – but you misunderstand us terribly. It is not strife I foster, but struggle. Without struggle, we exist only to exist. Society improves incrementally, but without any goal or purpose. Struggle introduces pain, sacrifice, effort and success; it introduces goals and values and change.'

'That's quite a ways from a predator eating its prey.'

'Not at all. Predator and prey are in a constant struggle for improvement, the apparent result of which is equilibrium. But in fact, that equilibrium is only a temporary stasis on top of struggle. Eventually change happens.'

'Bugs eliminated their predator.'

'Yes, we evolved the intelligence and social construct that changed the rules. Then we forgot what change means, under the weight of our rules.'

'Are you in favor of Click-Cluck's religion?'

'It is change. It brings meaning. It induces successes. We have no idea what our society will become.'

'And you don't know who has manipulated Click-Cluck to get her to this place?'

'I am not privy to that kind of scheming. I can tell you about the history of factions, but I can't give you – what is it that Click-Cluck says? I cannot give you "ghehgh guck ghehgh" (the play-by-play).'

'What are you two going to do?'

'I am going to stay here. What she is going to do, I cannot say.' That sounded disingenuous to Derek.

After a pause, Derek said: 'The disruptive force doesn't have to be religion. Technology and energy. They can be unlimited tools for change.'

‘We have already moved beyond the struggles your species has with energy and technology.’

‘I know, but what if I could offer you a technology that could change everything?’

‘And where would you get this technology?’

‘That is the question, isn’t it.’

The bug was silent. Then: ‘Of course we watch you. We know you communicate even without antennae. We don’t know with whom or why. It can make for a convenient story for the scriptures, but we suspect that it has nothing to do with our world. Is it a communication with your God?’

‘No, it is a – human communication. From the future.’

I hear: “Ghegh Dkkkesghtegh.” Very disruptive.

‘Why aren’t you interested? Is it that you don’t believe me when I say it could change everything?’

The Historian did not respond. ‘Do you know how many humans were taken from your world?’

Derek’s aggressive posture dissipated. He had to take a deep breath.

‘Not exactly.’

‘There were twenty humans. Some had to be put down because it was determined that they could not survive the transition to suspended animation. Most were put into a suspended state, and most did not survive. Do you know why?’

‘It sounds very harsh.’

‘It is. The harshest aspect is the biosphere transition.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning that every earthly organism – exclusive of your own DNA – had to be stripped from you – every virus, every bacterium, every freestanding protein. You were remade in the image of this planet, with our viruses, our bacteria, our proteins. This is a difficult, life-threatening transition. As fragile as humans are, we lost all but a few.’

‘– A few? Do you mean others survived?’

‘A few survived the trip, but they could not be reanimated.’

‘Are you sure? Are they still in suspended animation?’

‘That is a question that only a few can answer.’ The bug stood up.

Derek knew what that meant, and realized that that one sentence was the whole purpose of this conversation. He had to go back if he was ever to find out.

‘As for energy,’ the historian said, ‘I believe I know what you are talking about. There are those for whom energy is akin to religion. But do not forget when you discuss these things: We hear your words in our biosphere, our world of experience, our context. Every idea from earth is remade here.’

Sometimes, after waking from a dream of Derek’s bug life, I can’t go back to sleep. I go downstairs, turn the TV on low, and scoop myself a bowl of ice cream. The only possibilities on cable boil down to a few staple crime shows, maybe a comedy series. Once in a while there is a movie I haven’t seen already too many times. I’ll watch it, noting every moment where I remembered right – anticipated the character arriving, the knife falling. And every time that experience reminds me of Derek reliving his life. Once in a while, I am bored enough to go back up to bed. More often, I struggle through until the morning. If I have forgotten to turn off my alarm, I bound upstairs when it goes off. Otherwise, I start my coffee and head out the front door to get the paper.

Sometimes I think about how my father fetched the morning paper at my childhood home, an eternity ago. I hear a jetliner on its ascent from Raleigh-Durham Airport, and sometimes I can find its blinking lights in the sky. I stoop to pick up the newspaper. Together, the commercial jet and the paper tell me that nothing has changed, nothing really *could have* changed overnight. Humanity steps into the morning, more capable and more tenacious than I can explain from my own resolve. Whatever the newspaper documents in disasters and conflict, whatever my own doubts, this collective enterprise celebrates another dawn.

Derek looked for his own opportunity to visit the historian alone, and found him researching in his library one afternoon. He said: ‘Tell me about Click-Cluck’s religion. I need to understand it better.’ They both understood: “before I go back to society.” Derek had concluded that there was no way Click-Cluck could go back; she would insist on proselytizing, and eventually some authority would determine that that could not continue. Plus, she was now a murderer, whether in self-defense or not. What he hadn’t figured out was what she and the Historian wanted him to do on their behalf.

The Historian answered at great length, much of which Derek simply didn’t understand. While Click-Cluck had written a whole new bible, based on the dictation in her mind, the Historian believed that what she was given was, in fact, extant text from an ancient religion, edited and modernized in language, but essentially a restatement of the past. At the core was a monotheistic God, an all-powerful entity that had revealed itself to the Bug World fifty thousand years prior through a series of prophets. Each prophet had had a role in elucidating a new aspect of the godhead; each acknowledged those who had come before, but averred that they had missed a fundamental feature of their God. For one prophet, God was vengeful and destructive. For another, God was love, the provider and giver of the gases that kept their underground world thriving. For another, God was the wise giver of sexuality and identity. All these and a dozen more accounts deployed the same name for the deity, which Derek decided was best translated as “by which provided.”

Click-Cluck had added a new book, called roughly “The Modern Return.” In it, she affirmed that God had dictated the earlier books to her because they had been lost and God wanted the bug race to shake off the shackles of hyper-rationality and accept wisdom from a force greater than bugdom, greater even than the collective strength of all bugs together. Click-Cluck wrote: ‘We have conquered so much that we forget how much is invisible and how much is unachieved by us. We must recover the lost ambition of believing in that which is greater than us.’ At the end of her text she announced that the ‘last prophet’ obliquely mentioned in earlier texts was coming soon. Bugdom had to prepare itself for the time after the prophet, who was not a great unifier but a great separator, not an elitist but an unpredictable force that would undo, or at least redo, the social order. No “give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s,” but rather: ‘Take for our new mission.’

Derek asked: ‘If the ruling class is so divided, how does any faction hope to undo the order?’

‘There are different equilibria,’ replied the historian. ‘The social order seems to move among equilibrium points, granting one faction temporary ascendancy over the others. There may be points farther in a particular direction than we have heretofore known. Or it is possible that, with the right momentum, the next shift could jerk the social order out of any equilibrium.’

“Revolution,” Derek said in English. He figured that there wouldn’t be any bug equivalent.

‘If I understand your reference, then yes, perhaps.’

‘Are you afraid of that? Your society hasn’t known disorder for 25,000 years.’

‘Oh, there is more in our history than the usual accounts reveal. We have had many surprises over the years, even during my time on this planet. Every day I learn about some new conflict, and I have been working on this account for many years.’

Derek asked as best he could about sin, evil and the devil. ‘Do these exist in Click-Cluck’s religion?’

The Historian took his time, perhaps working through Derek’s mishmash of their language, perhaps reflecting on these alien concepts.

‘The religion revealed to Click-Cluck has no concept of “sin,” no notion of a “devil.” God has all facets in himself,’ whereby the Historian revealed his gender bias. ‘There is evil in all things in the same way that there is good; it is the manifestation that matters. You might call the tunnel that collapses evil because it manifests destruction. You might call a bug who tries to kill you evil because of that intention. But you cannot assert innate evil without acknowledging its potentiality in all things, whether they are in destructive motion or in precarious stasis, and it is exactly so in all beings with volition.’

“Click-Cluck,” Derek said one evening. “I think it is time that I went back to bug society.”
 “If that is your wish,” she replied and was silent.

I felt a tingly anticipation on the day of the reception. Doreen and I went our different ways with little acknowledgement in the morning. She had a busy day scheduled and wasn’t even sure she could make it. “Just let me know,” I said with artificial nonchalance. My day was a long, slow slog, though not much more than usual. I spent most of it with data manipulation – cleaning up files so they could be imported into the Geographical Information System (GIS), and figuring out how to present data appropriately. We got a number of requests to make this or that relationship between data types visible, which theoretically any user of the system could make happen, but the common assumption was that I did it better. I suppose I did, but it wasn’t really the work I was being paid for.

I had long since given up my obsession with visiting random locations in the county. Every time I left the office, in fact, I had people asking me where I was going. I wasn’t sure if hints had been dropped by the Sheriff’s Office or by Doreen. I didn’t like the nannying, but it was for the best. These days, I saw no more of the county than Chapel Hill, highway 86 and downtown Hillsborough.

I had no reason to go near Duke Forest. Once I had googled Barry Moore and primate research. Among the painful reminders that this search produced, I found a blog that Barry had started. Nothing referred to me, but this headline got my attention: “Duke Forest loses its grand master: Why the primate research center is now the lemur center.” According to Barry, the name change signified that the last Sasquatch had died, the one that I had purportedly contacted and that Duke researchers had allegedly done their best to keep under wraps. I stopped and sat motionless for a few minutes to see if this generated anything in me, like sadness or a feeling of loss or a sense of release. Nothing.

Not long after the deadly dullest meeting of the day, my mobile phone rang. I got very few calls on it, so I immediately assumed that it was Doreen saying she could not make the reception. Given my low-level tension over it, I would have been happy. I looked at the screen: private caller. Under other circumstances I might have just let it go to voicemail, but that day I answered: “Hello?”

A rapid, hissed voice said: “Don’t say a word. Just listen. I know you are looking for Derek Sorensen. They will tell you they don’t know anything about him, but that’s just to string you along. There will be a sighting of one of the creatures you know as bugs. This is prophesied. They believe that Derek must not be warned or it will not happen. One degree 22 minutes south, 36 degrees 51 minutes east.” The phone disconnected.

It felt like a movie moment, where the hero looks around to see who’s playing this joke on him, only I didn’t look, because no one in the office would try this sort of prank. I imagined the ex-lover, but I put that out of my mind and tried to work through the details. A quick check on the computer showed the coordinates to be in Nairobi National Park, a wildlife refuge at the edge of Nairobi, Kenya. That strange reference that had me immediately and perversely thinking again: a perfect way to get me out of the picture for a while. Then I considered the nature of the “contact”: Do the bug creatures kidnap Derek there? Did he live in Nairobi? And what did it mean, ‘prophesied’? Is there a text that the light keepers have been hiding?

I had to ask myself: Was this just a bleed-over from my dream? I knew I was awake, but a hallucination was not inconceivable. The phone affirmed that I had received a call from a private source. The caller could have been talking up the latest business telephone headsets and my mind had simply wandered. There was no way to reconstruct. The only hard data were the coordinates, which were not randomly out in the middle of Atlantic, but directly over a well-known and distinctive site. That could not have been chance, random numbers from a dream machine.

I had to run to another short meeting. When I got back to my seat the phone call was a bit less present for me, but it still demanded attention. The reception seemed like an obstacle in the process of

working this out, even though on meeting him (or her) I might be able to exclude the ex-lover as the voice behind the mystery. But I had to concede there were too many variables; it remained an insoluble problem.

I stayed late, waiting for Doreen's call. Richard pattered around his office for twenty minutes, occasionally peering my way, and then he marched out. "Late for a rendezvous," he said to me, as if to explain his quick pace. I didn't dignify that with a smile, but I nodded.

As I waited – and I had another twenty minutes to kill – I realized some things about myself. It's probably true that I sit with myself, doing nothing else, too infrequently. Maybe I am too distractible. Maybe if I had a more reflective personality these things would have occurred to me before, in less corrosive circumstances. First of all, I had to admit that I hated this sandwich job, squished under self-important middle managers and pushed from below by the upcoming and ambitious. I did what I was paid to do, what I had trained to do. People in the county offices saw me, and I saw myself, like a static function, operating on inputs and nothing more.

My reaction to this very insight showed me another thing. When stressed, I retreated into rationality or, rather, the feeling of being rational. But the escape was illusory. At that moment, I was immobilized by anxiety. I couldn't make sense of the call, couldn't cauterize the leakage it caused in my self-assurance. With each minute I felt deeper mired in my inability to control my thoughts – facing them, perhaps, but speechless before the sense of expanding chaos and lapsing control. I knew I needed to break the negative cycle, but I was afraid of what that might mean.

The rational faculties chug along as best they can, but if they lurch to a stop repeatedly you may end up acting on whatever thought is in front of you the moment you break free of your indecision. From indecisive to stupid.

I couldn't say why I cared. What difference did it make? What mattered? Doreen would doubtless have been happier with another, and Brett had already decided I was pathetic. My life's inventory was mercilessly brief: no close friends, dying love, no enviable achievements, nothing to show for my having lived but an accidental memoir of mental illness.

With each minute this elongating hole felt more deserved.

When the phone lit up and sang, I jumped. After four rings I picked up. "Yeah."

"John?" asked Doreen, unsure of the deep, congested voice she heard.

"Yeah," I said with more energy, but my voice was still hanging.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Are you ready to go?"

"In five minutes," she said. "I'll meet you inside, okay?"

"Okay, see you there." I pattered getting my stuff together. If Doreen left in five minutes, she would still beat me there, but I wanted a still bigger buffer, with no chance that I would appear there by myself, sporting only my pathetic motivation. I tried to break the spell I had put myself under by breathing in deeply three times. Each time, the exhalation came out as a sigh.

I had for so long not deviated from my route between work and home that it felt like an act of rebellion when I kept driving. Against whom? No one but myself, but a creature of habit still feels the violation. And the contextless freedom: I could go anywhere, do anything. I savored the feeling for the ten minutes it took me to get to the intersection of highway 54 and the Friday Center. If I was going to be free, now was the moment. Just keep driving. Stop at a bar. Drink two drinks incognito. Let voicemail take Doreen's calls. Leave when I'm ready, and head home if that's what I want to do. Even the thought of it helped me feel better.

I parked, got out of the car and sauntered toward the main doors. I saw Doreen's car. Couples, groups and individuals were arriving, in much more of a hurry than I. The business suit set on the one hand, and the warm cuddly-bear sweater set on the other. They did not mingle. Same inside the hall. I

stopped at the table to the right of the entrance – most ignored it – and searched for a sticky nametag with my name. I saw none. I decided not to take them up on the waiting blank tags and fat-edged permanent markers.

I did not see Doreen in my quick nonchalant scan, so I walked over to the no-host bar. The predictably self-absorbed groups of people with drinks blocked the way, so I had to squeeze past one offended gentleman and I begged pardon from a woman, who only acknowledged me as someone too close to her personal space. The bartender, a smartly dressed, graying gentleman with a pre-stocked tip jar, looked at me without a word. I knew I should have ordered a red wine or gin and tonic to fit in, but I asked for a beer. A Heineken, yes, thank you, ignoring the price and dropping a dollar in the jar.

I thought I saw Doreen across the hall, but I wasn't sure. The groups were now conveniently blocking me from mingling, so I stepped off to the side and stood observing, sipping.

The business participants mostly knew each other, probably from regular events like this reception. From what I could hear, the subgroups shared the same defining professional experiences – I hear ya, Joe – and seemed to like each other. The laughs came not, as I half expected, from: “can you believe those patients?” but “Don't try to tell me you weren't under the table at the Christmas party” and “I would so like to go to the gym but I can't find one near me that hasn't been taken over by triathletes.”

The sweater crowd was in a minority, less boisterous and more suspicious. They didn't mingle as much. Probably worked alone in their homes or small business offices, didn't share stories with each other, were used to the burden of the lone professional counted on by sick and needy individuals. But they didn't envy the suiters, didn't do anything to indicate they wanted to have what the others had. Smug.

I meanwhile was the critical, self-doubting outsider whom a number noticed at the edges and every so slightly resented. This was their time and place.

I was ten minutes into these observations and moments of blankness, when someone surfaced next to me, sipping a clear tonic drink.

“You're John Densch, aren't you?” he said, with a half smile. I looked at him and couldn't place him. He was carefully dressed and trussed, with a basically handsome, if curvy face that seemed not to have changed from childhood, only grown larger and added a five o'clock shadow. His large pupils added to the puppy-dog look. “You don't recognize me. We've met before – my name is Roger Hogan.”

He put out his hand and I took it. I held on for an instant too long as I realized the truth. He may have seen the recognition, but it didn't matter to him.

Though I wanted nothing more than to look around, I asked: “I'm sorry, I don't recognize you. Do you know my wife, Doreen Phelps?”

“Yes, I do,” he said and took a drink.

Oh God, I thought. Literally. “How do you know each other?”

“We met a number of years ago when Doreen joined the society. I think we were on a subcommittee together. I work at Glaxo Smith Kline, and we've had more than one occasion to compare notes. Sometimes provide objective advice. Help each other out.”

I couldn't engage on that, so I covered with a swig. “Please remind me when we met,” I said.

“I think we met two years ago at a retirement party for one of Doreen's colleagues.”

“Two years ago,” I said, shaking my head. I think I was grinning to avoid a grimace. “You have a good memory for faces. And names.”

“I do,” he replied evenly, with a small smile. “What brings you to the reception this year?”

“I don't know,” I said. “I just thought it was time. Do you ever have that feeling?”

“Sometimes,” he said. He looked out at the crowd. “I normally don't come myself.”

“Hmmm. Why this year?”

“I suppose it was time. I really just wanted to check in. I have a lot of old friends here. I don't socialize as much as I used to.”

“No? Too busy?”

“After a sort. My fiancée has a teenage daughter and, well, I’ve been trying to give her a substitute father. A lot of carpooling, dining together, for very little interaction.” A sip. “But she’s a good kid.”

“I understand,” I said. “Maybe you could help out with my son.” I regretted that instantly, but I couldn’t take it back. “He thinks I’m the lamest individual on the planet.”

“Really? Why?” he asked, sipping.

I didn’t want to open that topic, so I said: “I don’t know. Don’t all teenagers go through that?”

“I imagine.”

There was a silence. I hadn’t been fair, after he had opened to me. I followed up: “We don’t see eye-to-eye. He thinks I’m something of a techno-apologist, who ignores the cost of technology for the planet and for our humanness.”

“Sounds like your son is quite sophisticated.”

I smiled. “I suppose he is. I’m sure he gets that from Doreen.” We both chuckled and I cursed myself.

We tried a couple other abortive topics, but I had stopped paying attention and was looking around for her. He followed my eyes, I knew, but I couldn’t help it. I caught half of her jacket and skirt, but I couldn’t see her face from where she stood. – I hadn’t imagined that it would happen this way. I had assumed I would have to watch who furtively spoke with her and whom she shooed away. In retrospect, it made perfect sense that her ex-lover would come find me. The ideal profile: fearless, friendly, accommodating, even a Good Samaritan. Too damned good.

Her conversation partner sashayed to the left, and the way between Doreen and me cleared almost magically. A moment passed before she focused on me and realized that I was there. I think she had forgotten even – forgivable, given how little she saw me in her work context. Two moments and she saw who was standing next to me. Nothing in her expression. Three moments, and I could see it dawn on her what was happening here.

The progression on her face took just a handful of seconds, as it went from confusion to apprehension to indignation and anger, then more slowly to disappointment and sadness. As I watched the last expression spread across her face, an image formed itself in my mind: Her heart, surrendering its place in her chest, pulled itself up through her throat until it could get hold of her lips. With one last desperate pull, it reached the edge of her now open mouth and plunged. It fell for a frozen moment, the length of a single beat, before splatting on the thin carpet and disgorging all the blood left inside.

The historian asked Derek to follow him into his library. The walls were lined with parchment-like scrolls. The historian said: ‘These are the tools of my craft – remembrances, documents, copies, transcripts, all carefully recorded and brought to me by agents of the ruling class. Without them, I would be nothing but a speculator.’

Derek: ‘Couldn’t it be that they misrepresent the truth?’

‘Indeed. I deem them unreliable unless they are confirmed by independent sources.’

‘But what if all your sources are similarly tainted? What if the factions themselves are just a sham?’

The historian grunted bug-style. ‘Possible. But we all start somewhere; we all need the belief that we understand the world. Nothing in this world would make sense to me if you convinced me there were no factions.’

‘What if this whole region were just the property of one faction or coalition, one that wanted to make you believe you were interacting with the entire ruling class?’

‘Then,’ the historian said, ‘I am beholden to them for giving my life a sense of meaning. But don’t forget that I have lived among them, I have seen all the factions in action.’

Derek didn’t respond. He looked around at the thousands of texts, a near miracle in that world – bugs didn’t read books. We have already seen the projection that Derek used in the bug world to watch

television. That technology could be seen with both eyes and antennae, but it was a poor medium for the transfer of dense information. Scrolls presented a denser format, but all the vulnerabilities of papyrus played themselves out on Bug World. When the antennae first became an extension to bug evolution, they became a perfect conduit directly into the bug brain. They sent out radar signals to paint the visual world, but could as easily absorb microwave signals from other sources. And there was something about the way the antennae transferred that incoming information – the bug brain became practically photographic.

But here, where functioning antennae were rare, the written word came back into its own. The historian described his early struggles with trying to learn from scrolls. It would be like a human trying to learn from multiple voices at once – a bug’s eyes have little of the discipline and focus that we expect without question. This was another reason that the historian was seen with such reverence. Machines could be made both to create and to process scrolls, but machines failed here and the bug had to make things work as they were.

Bugs can mostly memorize what they hear as well. This skill is developed in young bugs on the assumption that if memorization works for antennae it ought to work for ears, though the promise never quite lives up to reality. In bug society, most bugs take advantage of simulcast antenna feeds rather than depend on their ears.

There were probably hundreds of bugs who had the complete scripture in their minds. The historian told Derek that factions of the ruling class were experimenting with a technology to remove memories via the antennae. But even if the hundreds of bugs could all be corralled and cleaned, Click-Cluck’s text was probably being shared in other, less vulnerable forms throughout bugdom.

Derek asked, ‘What do you want from me when I return?’

‘I have a text for you to deliver, but that is pretext only. Click-Cluck has a message that you must deliver to the bug responsible for her antennae, and only to that bug.’

‘Who?’

‘We can’t answer that.’

‘How will I know who it is?’

‘Click-Cluck is sure that you will know.’

Derek started to get a panicky feeling. ‘Wait, I am supposed to guess who is on our side? And what if I’m wrong?’

‘Even a mistake can consume resources.’

‘So – oh well? What happens to me? What happens to you?’

‘Maybe nothing, maybe everything. Don’t forget that anyone who chooses can be watching us right now and deciding what they will do, regardless of what you actually do tomorrow.’

‘What if I refuse?’

‘What are you refusing? To go back to society? To do what your guide and disciple expects of you? To see if another human can be found on this world? To get away from the endless sameness of this existence? To avoid another ambush by death-dealing bugs? What?’

‘I am refusing to be your “pawn”.’ Derek had to explain the context, but only until the historian realized what earthly game was meant.

‘I assure you, you are not a pawn in a bug game of Chess’ (“ghhheghzz”).

‘No? then what am I?’

‘Perhaps a knight. Unpredictable, dogged, fearless. Ready to sacrifice.’

‘I don’t want to sacrifice, and certainly not for your ruling class feuds.’

‘Then sacrifice for your queen,’ said the historian, and thereafter Derek had no answer.

Derek spoke several times with Click-Cluck before he was ready to go. At the last visit, she said: ‘I know you will want to hear this because of how humans are. The historian and I are becoming a couple.’

That did not surprise him. He saw the change in her and imagined that he could even smell the attraction between them, a chemical richness, even if it meant nothing to his own organs. What made it all the more extraordinary was that the historian was surrounded by female bugs, mostly visibly younger. Was he a connoisseur? Was he a playboy? Derek had no one to ask, but the math was pretty convincing. What, then, was it about Click-Cluck? And what did she see in him? Derek couldn't speculate on the physical attraction, but they shared a notoriety and the reality of being chosen among bugs. Celebrity, in a bug way. There was nothing that Derek could say about that, but he could feel a sense of abandonment, of disconnection. Even so, he had to acknowledge his infatuation, even something deeper. Something impossible.

'Will I see you again?' he asked.

Click-Cluck: 'I am sure that we will see each other again, Derek of Earth.'

'Then I will say: "Until then".'

She repeated the words in her click-pop way.

The historian had provided a scroll with maps. He had assured Derek that there would be no consequence to his return. If he ran into Thunk or his thugs, he had only to say that he was on an errand from the historian – that should get him safely to the governmental quarter. From there, he could take his time finding the bug to turn the scroll over to. There would likely be lots of interest in Derek finding the bug he sought for Click-Cluck, so he could take his time. What happened then, the historian had no idea.

Derek was escorted away from the historian and Click-Cluck by a succession of acolytes, all female. He wanted to ask them who they were, but he could find no way to start the conversation. There were no antennae among them, and that made him think, maybe something that simple, the little pleasure of sharing thoughts privately, was enough to make a couple?

It was two days before Derek found his way back to their old chamber. No one had moved in, much to his surprise, but the dead had been removed and the bug blood cleaned up. Well, now was their chance, he thought. He rested there a day before continuing. On his way out, he met their former boss and let him know about Click-Cluck's engagement. Without real antennae, Derek had no way to read the bug's reaction, but he thought he could see some turmoil in the bug's little arms. The bug wished him well and called out the crew for the day's work. They had a very young bug with them who had taken over Derek's role; Derek thought – because of the scarring – it was the bug they had rescued the day he and Click-Cluck had first spoken openly.

Derek recognized the way back to where they had long ago ditched their vehicles, the chambers and long passageways, the bugs camped out in darkness and quiet, the jagged flooring. But he had to look long and hard to find his vehicle. Someone had stacked it in a pile meant for parts and melting down. He was able to pull it off and much to his surprise, it started up as soon as he took his place atop it.

Once he left the safety of that cavern, he would not have much time to find the entrance to back to bug society, because of low oxygen, and the historian warned him that the surfacescape changed frequently. Nothing might seem familiar. He jetted out the tunnel into a dreary snow of dust and grit. The ravine was nearly full – overdue for a scouring – and he could hear the screaming wind above. The sunlight came down as a dark brown glow. They had originally come up the ravine, and he was heading back down now. After a few minutes of increasing depth, the ravine began to shallow out and the roaring became louder, the dust swirled menacingly. He saw nothing that indicated an entrance. His vision was weakening at the edges, contracting. Despite a mask, he coughed now without interruption, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to get his breath.

He gunned the vehicle in a panic and stopped only when he felt buffeting wind from above, like slaps across his head. He turned around and headed back. In the worst case, he hoped he could still return to the entrance that he had just come through. That's when I heard him say: "I could use some help here." I thought: How can I help you? "Not you," he said. "Bollum. God damn you, Bollum. Get me out of here."

We both noticed the opening at the same moment. Had it been there before? Had it been obscured from the other direction? Had Derek's speed prevented him from noticing?

He banked in and zoomed up the tunnel to get to clear air. Twice he banged against a side and tore some flesh. But his lungs were burning, and that was more important. Finally there was a low-lit cavern with clean, pure air. He pulled up the vehicle, jumped off onto all fours, and coughed and vomited onto the floor. The process of clearing his lungs went on for a half hour. Then he got out some glop and tried to still his stomach and stop the shaking. Within an hour he was well again, safely in Bug World.

Had Bollum helped him? And if he had, what did that mean about this life and world, about what I was living through with Derek? Could it have been the expectation of help that made him / us more observant? Could Kurowitz have been right: was Derek just a little piece of Bollum?

"I hear your thinking," he said, leaning against the wall and resting. "Who's Kurowitz?"

"He says that you're just something Bollum is projecting into me, trying to tell us on earth how to avoid what he calls an evolutionarily dead society like Bug World."

"Evolutionarily dead. I like that."

"That's why I need to find you, Derek. To know what's true."

"Like the Dalai Lama."

"What?"

"They always find a reincarnation of the Dalai Lama."

I thought about that. "So – I'll find Derek and think I've found evidence of you, but it just satisfies my search, nothing else? I suppose the proof can only come from the you who has already been kidnapped?"

"You really don't want me, anyway, John. – You want evidence of *them*."

"You mean the bugs?"

"Yes, the bugs. Their reality is closer to you than I am. The historian told me something. Two things actually. First, against all protocol, the team that came to earth left behind evidence of their presence. That seems pretty certain. Second, the returning crew was two bugs short. The speculation is that they stayed behind."

"There are bugs on earth?" I must not have been connected when the historian told him this.

"The official report is that they died after having become contaminated and were jettisoned in space."

"When did they say they left evidence? What kind of evidence?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Someone called me anonymously and said that there is evidence of the bugs that kidnap you – in Nairobi, Kenya. Have you ever been to Africa?"

"Not that I recall." Sarcastically.

"Okay, so it's not you. But maybe it's a you in a different timeline, maybe one that Bollum has created. Or didn't. Assuming there's any truth, what could they hope to gain by giving me this information? That's what I don't get. Why does anyone who has that kind of information care whether I know or not?"

Derek was silent for a while. Then he laughed and ended with a coughing jig. "John, John, John. Somebody is definitely playing us. We're both fools on a fool's errand, driven by our own interest, on the behalf of someone else, for reasons we can hardly fathom. I've got to finish this trip to find out if there are any humans here besides me. You have to find evidence of bugs on earth. Both of us are just hoping we don't go completely crazy in the process."

"Is this Bollum's sense of humor? – When you put it that way, you look an awful lot like a narrative device."

“Same back at you. You’re in my head the same way I’m in yours. And don’t tell me you know you’re real. I know the same thing. They always find the Dalai Lama. Always.”

Derek mounted the vehicle and steered into the tunnel that led back to civilization. It seemed to know what he wanted – to return to the place he had left – but he assumed that he would be intercepted before he arrived. He just kept going, finally entering one of the thoroughfare tunnels, which whisked him along in complete silence. There were a few bugs, but none approached him, no one spoke to him. He started speaking in his best Bug (though he found himself using the agrammatical verbal constructions of the badlands): ‘Hello, this is Derek of Earth and I wish to deliver a message to Ggherck-Zgherr; I need assistance finding him.’ He repeated every few minutes for an hour or so.

Finally, the impossible happened. The entire tunnel came to a stop. The few bugs near him clicked at each other. After a few minutes, a contingent of thug-sized bugs arrived. After all these months of denuded bugs, Derek was struck by the elegance and beauty of their swaying antennae. One of the bugs retrieved something from his back and held it out for Derek. It was a new mask with functioning antenna/eyes. They surrounded him and the tunnel came to life again.

The trip lasted for several hours more. Derek was able to get sustenance from a little package he had tied to his exo-skeleton. He tried a couple times to ask to send a message to Click-Cluck, but of course all he could do was try to describe what he wanted and no one responded. The bugs around him were completely silent (or communicating with their antennae?). He fell asleep more than once.

He was dozing when a bug nudged him to the side. He took control and followed that bug, perhaps the one who had given him the new mask, into a series of ever-smaller tunnels. Finally they were passing through a tunnel not much larger than Derek’s vehicle. At one point, he had to stop and inch through because of a vertical narrowness. The bugs sailed through.

Then, without any visual marker that Derek could see, the bugs ascended one after another through the ceiling. Derek followed and entered a large hall. A low hum was emanating from somewhere. Electric glow everywhere: illuminated signs and interfaces, outlined bugs; and this mask introduced a new effect, visible electro-magnetic field lines whose purpose was apparently to allow him to orient his antennae to better tune in one of several broadcasts. His lenses indicated he could, in fact, select a stream, and he did so. The first was a bug droning on – he suspected that if his goggles were plugged into his brain he would be receiving much more – but the second was music of a sort. Mostly clicking it seemed, in various cadences and octaves, an occasional low whistle, and constant buzzing. The third was another bug clicking away, but this one was soon replaced by another and then another. Derek tried to decipher what they were saying, but it failed him. The room was so alive that he began to feel overwhelmed.

The one bug signaled for him to land his vehicle and wait. Derek complied. A succession of bugs clicking seemed to be a roll call of some kind, perhaps a vote. An action of the ruling class?

All the bugs were floating, so when Derek noticed that a bug had entered the large hall on all four legs he paid attention. Not only was the bug on foot, but he was not lit up in the mask. Derek could only see him because of the dim light that emanated from the corners of the hall.

The bug was not big enough to be a thug, but Derek watched him approach with some suspicion. He braced when the bug kept coming without a click. The bug shifted his path just shy of Derek and then plunked onto his chest. He lifted something off his back and tossed it to Derek. It fell just shy. The bug stood up, kept walking on his new path and eventually reached the far end of the hall and disappeared into a door that itself was not outlined or marked in Derek’s goggle vision.

Derek finally looked down. It looked like crumpled white paper, an impossibility, but when he lifted it he found exactly that. Written on it in regular but faded script were ten English words: “Welcome. Go with them. Don’t question. We will find you.” The paper felt warm – and kept getting hotter. In a moment flame emerged from under his thumb, and he dropped the page. It burned completely.

A few minutes later an official greeting party arrived, all on discs, all outlined in his sight, their images annotated such that if Derek had also learned to read more than rudimentary Bug he might recognize them and there that he was with some of the world's luminaries. They led him out of the hall into a smaller room configured as a dining hall. The bugs all took their places, and Derek noticed that his was at the head of the low table. There was a small bowl and spoon, almost human.

He said in his best Bug, although no one seemed to be paying attention to him: 'Thank you for this unexpected greeting.'

No response, as far as he could tell. They kept on clicking and chirping. Then Derek realized that the symbols streaking across his mask approximated letters. The English was no better, no less machinelike, than before he left bug society; its coherence was not helped by the scrolling. But Derek got this much: "Derek of Earth, welcome in our midst. We wish you to live among us, as you please. We miss our colleague [Click-Cluck] but it is the will of the Ruling Class that she and you do not interact. She will be much happier in her new union, and we hope to see her here again one day as a productive member of our society. Enjoy a meal with us."

The food was the same glop as anywhere. Was there a dining club hidden somewhere deeper in the ruling quarter? Bug-bat steaks cooked over coals? Wine made from molding slime?

After dining, the bowl was passed around: Dung balls, guaranteed to take Derek back to earth, if only for a short time. Before the bowl reached him, though, he saw another smaller bowl being traded among the bugs on the other end. Derek passed the dung balls untouched. He didn't know how to ask for some of the other kind – but then suddenly the bowl moved down the table, as if someone were reading his mind. He wondered what the bugs had built into this mask. In the bowl he saw small mushroom-sized balls, splotched and streaked with some other growth. He picked up one and handed on the bowl.

It didn't dissolve on his tongue, so he tried to break it. The crack traveled up his skull. A real jawbreaker. "Wait a minute," his screen was saying. Then: "Spit it out. Your jaw isn't strong enough." He took the ball from his mouth and put it in the bowl in front of him. That's when he noticed something oozing out, a green gel, almost – almost – as if something were alive and escaping. "Lick it," the screen said. He lifted the ball and licked. He repeated the cycle of waiting and licking a few times until he realized that time was slowing.

The psychoactive effects had begun. In that heightened state he realized that nothing was reading his mind; he was just being observed, both in the room and – especially – through his interactions with the mask. They were watching him from a quarter inch away.

He also saw that these bugs wanted nothing to do with him; someone was forcing them, a political farce no different than any on earth. He thought: Your pathetic kowtowing and scheming mean nothing to me. I am immune.

Time slowed even more. Through an excruciatingly slow motion of his arm, he reached up and removed his mask. In the dim light he suddenly felt alone.

A deep and deepening hum emerged, growing louder until he experienced the buzz as a vibration deep inside his skull. It felt like an oversized bee gyrating and bouncing around. The dim light of the chamber slowly gave way to a brightening multi-hued sunrise in his mind. The now motionless bugs were lit up in colors that Bug World had never seen before.

He was awakening into something new. He became aware of another presence.

"Bollum?" he said in his mind.

"What are you doing here?"

"Bollum?"

Rather than answer, the voice manifested itself as an energy flux that pulsed out of nothing and engulfed him, a white plasma unwinding itself endlessly. Derek decided that it was God.

The Godhead, the All Powerful, the Eternal, he thought.

"Don't jump too far with that," the voice said.

“But you are God, right,” Derek replied in his mind. “The deity, eternal and infinite.”

“Not so.”

“Why not so? What is not possible for God?”

“What not possible? God becomes impossible once eternity and the infinite are real. I cannot be greater than that which is already infinite and eternal, but I must be greater than everything that is. Thus: if I exist, the infinite is not possible. The contrapositive is also true.”

“But the universe itself must be infinite, or at least it must rest in the infinite.”

“As in the Atlas problem: What is holding up the world? The finite must have justification in the infinite because the finite is never justified in itself. It’s always the flaw.”

“The flaw?”

“The flaw in a perfect plan. The fall from absolute grace. The perfect is that which never changes from what it is. Never changing. The eternal. Never otherwise. The infinite.”

“Well, it must be possible for even a mortal to find a single, perfect moment.” Derek was thinking that he was there, motionless, timeless, speaking with God.

“Yes, the perfect moment is the infinite moment. The passage of time without the weight of time. Infinite freedom, energy unbounded, no chains to tame it.”

“So the infinite is possible.”

“No, the infinite is impossible.”

“But you just said – ”

“A conundrum for you to consider. You will never know an infinite moment, just special ones, like this one. This one has been nice, but it has to end. You have to get moving again, and I must get back to my own devices. We’ll meet again under other circumstances. For now, you’re about to feel a really big rush. Get ready.”

Derek thought that impossible, with the utter stillness of his spirit and the moment. Then – whamm. Time took off with a merciless leap, and Derek felt every inch of him being jerked into the future. All systems went offline and his consciousness dissolved.

Doreen had been avoiding my eyes since the reception. If she spoke at all then in monotone. If she saw me staring, she gave a weak smile to disarm any indignation I might muster. We both knew the trial against me was over, but I didn’t know what exactly she had convicted me of, in my enforced absentia. I felt that I was justified in unraveling the mystery of her ex-lover, that she had compelled me to solve it. At the same time, as I had stood there that afternoon with Roger Hogan, I saw the situation from her eyes: ‘you had forgiven me, we have been working so hard, why do you want to break this all apart with your self-righteousness?’ Did she recognize that I knew of her ongoing consultation with him? The reason for her doing so really didn’t matter, whether she felt that she was justified taking his impartial advice (after all, he was engaged to another woman) or she had thought it impossible that I might have made the connection. Or maybe I was wrong about the situation, and she had consulted someone else altogether. In that case I could only hope that she would reconstruct the tracks I had followed and why.

But I was right about so much. It was an odd feeling of success, as if I recognized my murderer just before the knife plunged. It feels better to know, but what good comes of it?

I thought about finding God in that moment of timelessness. There was a certain elegance in that, if it wasn’t just the drugs talking. Maybe it wasn’t God, but one of the energy beings that Bollum had described. Especially since the being argued so hard against the infinite. Or was that the disavowal of God by a fallen angel? Even Satan?

I swore that morning that I had to solve the Derek mystery, one way or other. Brett and Doreen both left the house before me. I dialed PsychEnergy again. It rang several times before I heard her voice: “PsychEnergy. We help you release your own psychic energy. May I help you?”

“Barbara, this is John Densch.”

A silence. “I didn’t return your call, John.”

I know. “I need your help.”

“John,” she said, an admonishment.

“I am stuck. I really need your help finding someone.”

“Someone? You want me to find the source of your visions.”

I was dumbstruck but had to tell myself that that could be reconstructed from any of a number of people.

“I want to find Derek Sorensen, the kid I dreamed about being on another planet. An abductee.”

Her voice plaintive and negative: “I don’t do science fiction, John. I only do our own planet, our own destiny.”

“I need your help. The ‘visions’ are stronger than ever. And I am beginning to doubt my sanity. I have to know whether any of it is real.”

“Think about this, John,” she said. “You know about the Dark Knight Society. They stand for the opposite of everything you wrote about and for everything *we* stand for. And let’s not even talk about all the negative things you wrote about Jerry and me.”

Ouch, I thought. Still, I couldn’t apologize, couldn’t go backwards. “Do you really agree with everything they stand for?”

“I believe,” she said and hesitated. “I believe that the answer is not in other worlds. It’s not in more technology. It’s not in your visions.”

“But either I am going crazy or I’m in the middle of something that is just too big for me. I need help. And don’t tell me to see a shrink. I’ve been there and done that. I’ve sworn off the Keepers of the Light. But the dreams just keep coming, more vivid and powerful all the time. I need to find certainty.”

“I can’t offer certainty, John.”

“Okay, not certainty. An indication. Something from outside of me that is not someone else’s agenda, and not someone telling me what I want to hear.”

“What if I just told you what you don’t want to hear?”

“That’s better than where I am.”

“Then – read Carl Jung about flying saucers. You are experiencing a dream from the collective unconscious, John. There’s nothing unusual about you or your visions. There is no logic in dreams beyond the symbolic, for however hard you search. Alien abduction is really just a compensatory dream of our age, John. We need *collectively* to understand how this myth comforts us and prevents us from seeing, really seeing, what is happening. You need to wake up and smell the fires that are melting our world.” The phone clicked.

My desperation rose. I dialed Barry Moore. Just an anonymous voice mailbox, so I hung up and sat down at our home computer to write an email: “Barry – I am desperate to understand what is happening to me. I know alien abduction is outside your usual limits, but I can’t stop it. The vision is taking over my life. If you can help in any way, please write back.”

At that point, I had to take a deep breath, let the air go, and gather myself up to go to work. I didn’t remember the drive at all as I walked away from my car – a scary feeling. Work helped calm me a little. The usual frustrations, the lack of engagement, that desperate feeling that the salary is small compensation for a life consumed by the trivial, and at the same time the draining feeling that the salary is more than you deserve for the meager originality and dedication you bring. My boss eyeing me. Colleagues dancing in slow motion, concerned about every last thing, every little slight. As if any of that mattered, I told myself. As if anything else mattered with this tug-of-war tearing me apart. I resolved again that I had to do something, but a bad ending seemed inevitable, because I couldn’t go backwards and I saw no way forward. That fatalism felt strangely calming.

I found myself dialing. “Kurowitz?” I asked.

“Speaking,” said a voice that had answered with a grunt.

“Can we meet and talk? This is John Densch.”

“Meet and talk? Is this more ego petting, or are you ready to commit?”

“What ego petting? Man, I’m falling apart here.”

“Falling apart? The earth is falling apart. You, sir, are collapsing. I suggest you go back to your therapist. The Society won’t harass you, but don’t expect sympathy from us.”

“Look,” I said. “I told Doreen I was done with the Society. And I am. But she can’t have anything against my meeting with you. I won’t hold anything back. – Derek and I are reading each other’s thoughts.” I paused for a reaction before changing tack. “Did someone from the Society call me? About Kenya?”

“Kenya? About what?”

“Someone called – I couldn’t recognize the voice – and they gave the coordinates of the nature park next to Nairobi. I have no idea what it means, except the voice said that the Society expected bugs there to kidnap Derek. The Derek I know has never been to Nairobi, though. Does this show I’m serious?”

“It does. Especially since you just accused someone of betraying the Society.”

“It can’t be that serious,” I said, but with a rising feeling of regret.

“I’m sure it isn’t, John. But the Society has rules.”

We agreed to meet after work. I called home and left a message. That was inadequate for our usual family arrangements, but I just couldn’t face the staccato conversation with Doreen. Kurowitz and I decided to meet in Chapel Hill at Top of the Hill. I had to park in the lot on Rosemary and walk over. The small-town bustle was comforting to me this day. I made my way up to the restaurant. Kurowitz was nowhere to be seen – inside or on the patio – although he had had little of the distance to travel that I had. I took a table for two near the patio that others had avoided because of the draft from the doors. I ordered a beer.

I had sipped half and thought twice to get up to go before Kurowitz showed.

“You’re lucky,” he said as he draped a jacket on his seat. “I had to do a lot of convincing to be sitting here.”

That’s supposed to soften me up?

When he sat down he felt the draft, so he got back up and put his jacket on. “You’re lucky,” he repeated. “I had to promise that this wasn’t another of your wild goose chases.”

“What wild goose chases?”

“Oh, woe is me,” he mimicked. “I’m so confused. But I won’t tell you a thing.”

“Look,” I said, aggravated but trying to stay civil, “I will tell you everything I know. I don’t need the sarcasm.”

“Of course,” he said, without a chuckle. “John, you are very important to us. Let me be honest with you. At any one time, the Society has just a handful of ‘sources’ like you. All over the world. Taking care of them is our first priority.”

Another tack for softening me? A source? Priority one? This felt scripted but not exactly practiced. Was he given just what he needed to know, like me? Was he a recent recruit, a handy way to get to me? Or maybe I was the bait to keep him interested? Did it matter?

I started to talk, to tell him about Derek, Click-Cluck and the historian. I was half way through my second beer when I finished with the story, ending with Derek’s conversation with God.

“I’ve been wondering if the God he spoke with is a future human?” I asked.

“You know,” he said with a pompous expression, “that we believe Derek is a projection from Bollum, perhaps one of his personalities, one of his virtual lives. So, yes, it could be exactly what Bollum wants us to know about future humans.”

“I mean, it’s just not possible that that voice was God.”

“Let’s see,” he said. “The vision of a person who is suddenly higher than a kite, and whom you have seen and met only in dreams. And I’m supposed to believe it’s the Almighty speaking?”

“Happy is he who has not seen and yet believes,” I said.

“Happy indeed,” he said with a guffaw and drained his glass.

“What do you make of the assertion that either God or infinity is impossible?”

“I agree wholeheartedly,” he said, trying to attract someone’s attention to the fact that the replacement hadn’t arrived. And his buffalo wings were late. “Infinity is useful in mathematics and philosophy to mark boundary conditions, but we never get anywhere near the boundaries, so infinity itself quickly becomes uninteresting.”

“And God is interesting?”

“Indeed. Any motivator becomes interesting to science.”

“And does it follow that God is not infinite? That seems counter-intuitive, despite the ontological argument.”

“Counter-intuitive, perhaps. But there is nothing intuitive about a God.”

“What about the fact that every culture has had a belief in supernatural beings?”

“First, I don’t know if that’s true. Second,” with a connoisseur’s quaff of the newly arrived beer, “most societies have origin stories but know nothing about infinity. So, in fact, the infinite and infinitely powerful God is the incongruity.”

“And infinity makes an *origin* story impossible?” I thought maybe I was catching on.

“I would say. It’s much more reasonable to motivate the existence of the supernatural by creating an origin, even if the origin begs the question of what came before. At some point, finding more origins becomes uninteresting. – You know that numbers that are infinite in their expression, like pi, are called irrational numbers. They are the irrational truth, but in everything but theoretical mathematics we only care about the rational approximation.”

“Weren’t you arguing, the last time we met, that rationality is overrated?”

“Rationality in the sense that we feel like we’re in control,” he said. “Not in the sense that we need to understand the world around us. Our sense of control is the illusion.”

“Okay,” I said, unconvinced but wanting to move on. “Let’s agree on the supernatural, then. Is all this like saying, we might think there’s an infinitely powerful God, but we’re more interested in the local house god because it’s easier to find some cause and effect there?”

“I suppose,” he said, looking down at his drink. “I am no theologian, John, and don’t have the desire or need to speculate about ultimate causes. But there *are* ethical issues – ethical imperatives – on this planet that affect everything I think and act upon. One of those is death.”

“No one deserves to die?”

“Oh, there are those who deserve to die,” he said, almost pointing at me. “But there is no reason why we should countenance death as the natural endpoint of life, especially given the brief time granted to human beings. No reason, except that we have been powerless to end the cycle. Now the power is close as never before, and we can even see it approaching. It’s a bit like Zeno’s arrow. You celebrate that you’ve traveled half the distance, but then you need to travel that other half and in your growing anticipation the fact that you have traveled half the distance still seems too slow, and so on. Every single day short of eternal life seems eternal, for however much we progress. It’s enough to make you despair, almost.”

“Huh, sounds like you’re dreaming of control at the same time you reject it,” I answered. “I know this is easy to say, but I think I’m ready to live and die.”

“I’m happy for you, John, and pleased you’ll die a happy man. I, on the other hand, will rage against the night. I didn’t say we had to dutifully accept the lack of control, just that we have to acknowledge where the lines are, where we have control and where we don’t, and what will be required to redraw the lines.”

“So,” I said to change the subject, “what am I to make of the Nairobi story? Your illuminati would probably call it just another projection from Bollum, right? What do you believe? Is Derek at the end of that rainbow?”

“What I believe? I believe that you are called to do something great, but it has nothing to do with Derek and whether he exists or not.” He paused as if to indicate that praise did not come lightly from him. “The only thing that matters, John, is the completion of our evolution. There are, of course, constraints. It must happen before we destroy ourselves and our planet. It needs to happen in the context of freedom and equality. We cannot let too many suffer in the process. But make no mistake, John. Every other action is a meaningless reflex in a great organism that is waiting to be born.” Another pause. “Some of us will be able to participate in that birth.”

An unpleasant image conjured itself up, but overall he made a strong impression on me. “What is my role, then?”

“Your role is exactly what happened here tonight. You tell me what you experience, and I take it back for analysis. In the council.”

There, I thought. The confession that he was just the messenger boy.

“Let me tell you one other thing,” he said, seeing my expression. “You seem to think of the Society as some kind of medieval guild or fraternity. These are all eminently serious people. Some are not told everything because there is no need and, well, they respond better to the literal. But others are scientists and philosophers of the highest caliber. They all know that the most rational explanation for what has taken over your life is *not* that you are crazy. You should value that faith.”

As he stood and pushed his chair in, I said: “I do. Thank you, William.”

He nodded with a solemn expression and then made a slight misstep as he wandered away, chest out and head up. The bar had become much noisier, as I realized now with some surprise. Amid the sudden roar, I got up and left.

Doreen said nothing about my absence at dinner. It was as if in our relationship some scaffolding had collapsed and we sat among the wreckage, unable to move. We were afraid to speak, too, because the words would end up as projectiles fired in both directions. Of course, it might be that she wasn’t really mad at me about the reception, and that my meeting someone for a beer needed no comment. But I couldn’t deny the expression: She averted her eyes whenever possible and turned her lips down slightly, with the smallest hint of nausea. Even the wrinkles on her face were accentuated downward.

Brett knew we were fighting, but he seemed fine with a silent phase.

Barry Moore called. I had heard Doreen answer a call and talk in a hushed voice – Roger, I wondered? – but I gave her her privacy and went into the office. She came in a few minutes later and handed me the phone without a word. I hesitated. “Hello?”

“John Densch.”

“Who’s this?”

“I might say your worst nightmare, but I think there’s competition on that front.”

“Barry?”

“What could you possibly want from me?”

“I need advice. Objective, I-don’t-have-a-dog-in-this-fight advice.”

“I would say,” he responded, “that everyone everywhere has a dog, no matter what the fight. The only question is whether you know which dog and what fight. But why the PETA-baiting metaphor? What trouble are you in?”

“You’ve seen my text.”

“Your bash-every-friend-you’ve-ever-had memoir? I glanced at it.”

“I have been pursued by people who believe that the stories I told are real. Or at least the part having to do with the being from the future, Bollum, and unlimited energy. The singularity. The evolution of

humankind. They want me to help them communicate with this Bollum character. But then someone else wants me to find Derek Sorensen, the alien abductee, and prove that he exists, or maybe find his abductors and prove that they exist. The first group thinks that he is just a projection from Bollum, a way of telling us what is needed to bring the singularity about. The Bug World is for them just an example of a world gone awry.”

“I see. The singularity is sentient artificial intelligence, consciousness uploaded, all that?”

“Yes. But the Bollum story was really about energy. The freedom from our organic bodies is just an effect from the absolute control of energy.”

“Okay, sure. And you need me why?”

“I’ve been having dreams about Derek. Every night. Vivid, as real as if I was there. And Derek talks to me. He sees me in his head, too.”

“Sounds like you need a sleep aid, or fewer of them.”

“I tried to talk to Barbara about this,” I said, figuring that I could concentrate his attention that way.

“Ah, our good psychic.”

“She is involved with a group that rejects the singularity and is opposed to the Keepers of the Light, the secret society devoted to Bollum’s unlimited energy. She refused to talk to me.”

I could hear the retort in my head: Smart woman. But Barry didn’t say anything.

“What would you do in my place? I’ve told the Society that I wouldn’t be their patsy, but they are the only people who take me seriously. This whole story has been a real strain, another big strain, on my relationship with Doreen.”

Barry didn’t jump in right away, but he couldn’t resist: “In your place – I don’t know, John, I wouldn’t be in your place. I would either assume my visions are real and true, and operate on that assumption, or I would conclude that I am mentally ill and act accordingly. Take your stand, man, and let the chips fall where they may. *That’s* what I would do. – And how is your research into the bog monster going, Barry? Why, thanks for asking, John, it turns out that our only local evidence has died and been eliminated. The case is closed for lack of evidence. Yes, I will have to move on. No, don’t worry about me. But thanks for your concern. Goodbye, John.”

Derek recovered fairly quickly. Given the way bugs were now arrayed around him, he wasn’t sure but maybe time – and his heart – had actually stopped. His mask showed their attempts to communicate with him: “Move your hand if you hear us, move your hand.” He raised his hand and then rolled over onto his stomach. Despite the exo-skeleton he found it difficult to lift himself. He was thinking about what happened and wondering if God had just spoken to him, and if so, was it mediated through the drug or through the near-death experience thereafter?

And regardless, just what did he believe?

‘I’m fine,’ he tried to say, and he realized that the mask was correcting his pronunciation and rearticulating his clicks. This was new; he was pretty sure of that. Or was he just now paying attention?

One bug, nicely outlined in electric blue, was speaking to him: “Derek of Earth, please come with me. We will rest until tomorrow.”

Derek asked away in English, and it was translated into clicks: “What happens tomorrow?”

“You will meet with the ruling class.”

The other bugs left more or less immediately, but his guide stayed.

“What is your name?”

“You don’t need to know my full name. Call me Gluck-Bug.”

Derek was pretty sure Gluck wasn’t in the name, nor bug, but that’s how the translator spat it out. Okay. Sure.

Some twenty minutes passed before he was able to move and get on his vehicle.

As they waited, he asked: “What was that stuff?”

“That is a very special fungus. We call it the tongue of wisdom.”

“Does it give you wisdom?”

“Sometimes,” the bug answered.

“Does it ever kill?”

“Our species is accustomed to it. You should not eat it again.”

“Can you believe,” Derek said, taking a chance, “that I heard God talking to me?”

“God?” The bug paused. “Do you believe in God, Derek of Earth?”

“I haven’t much.” Had he already revealed too much to a bug not sympathetic to him or Click-Cluck?

“I don’t understand what that is: Belief. Faith. The irrational.”

“It’s irrational, just like you say.”

“Then it convinces on some other basis. Emotion. Family. Culture. Coercion. How is it real *belief*, and not wishful thinking, habit or coercion?”

“I suppose because once we are convinced through some circumstance, we want to make it our own.”

“As described, you are all egoists.”

Derek chuckled. “I suppose so. Haven’t you ever felt chosen?”

“I have been,” said the bug immediately. Derek was at first confused. Of course. Chosen as a member or a servant of the ruling class.

“Then you are all egoists, too?”

Derek was surprised that Gluck-Bug didn’t have a retort for that. Finally: “There is nothing egotistical about serving the greater good.”

“What,” asked Derek, abandoning his caution, “if that which you served were not actually the greater good, but some misrepresentation of it? Would the confidence in the values you serve not seem egotistical?”

“That is paradoxical.”

Derek didn’t understand, but then he thought maybe the translator had overloaded. Or maybe it just refused?

He doffed the mask and into the twilight clicked the same as best he could.

He put the mask back on to see the response: “I understand you. You have argued more conditionally than our language allows. You are putting impossibility upon impossibility. But perhaps for your sake we can assume the first premise and then argue the second.”

“I don’t want to argue. My point is that certainty can come in many different forms, and it’s not always possible to say what is justified.”

The bug’s antennae became more rhythmic. “Understood. Solipsistic to the core, you argue that we all have nothing more than a point of view. It doesn’t matter what good has come before you – you are always ready to tear it apart and start anew. There is indeed something dangerous about you, Derek. Destructive. Do you ever wonder if your race still exists?”

“I have faith, Gluck-Bug.”

He ate his morning glop in silence with Gluck-Bug, and then it was time to get on their vehicles. Just a few minutes later they exited the major tunnel and found their way into a small chamber. It was lit in a way that Derek had not seen before, as if lit for his eyes. He got off his vehicle, and Gluck-Bug said: “Come with me.” They went through a small low chamber and emerged into a hall, a gigantic hall, a space that disappeared into stretches of darkness before reaching the weak illumination of the distant walls. To his left Derek’s display showed the outlines of thousands of bugs and hundreds of signal lines. He found himself on something like a stage, with a dozen or so bugs floating to his right. Gluck-Bug kept moving off the stage.

The scene was strangely familiar. Derek thought of the stage where Click-Cluck had announced the religion to which she had dedicated herself, the scene that Thunk had once shown to him in order to drive them apart.

He looked at the outlined bugs, but the mask did not display the resolution needed for him to see the behavior of their antennae. When he slipped off the mask his eyes were unused to the darkness and he could see nothing.

The amplified clicking in his mask enticed him to put it back on. “Fellow bugs,” the scrolling transcription read, “we greet our guest today from the planet ‘earth.’ We do not know what that name is derived from, but it denotes both the planet itself and the dirt that covers its landmasses. Liquid or solid water covers 70 percent of the planet’s surface. Despite the planet’s oceans and despite its relative small size, there is still an incredible expanse of land where these ‘humans,’ as they call themselves, run rampant, at our arrival seven billion of them. Their energy comes mostly from hydrocarbons found under the planet surface, which they combust to create thermal, kinetic and electrical energy. Their energy consumption has been changing the global climate. Those with sufficient energy resources dwell inside artificial caverns to counteract the effects of the local climate. They struggle in numerous regional societies, competing over resources such as energy, water and construction and tool-building materials, and endlessly exploiting each other.”

An elaborate condemnation of human indifference and cruelty continued from there. Derek was impressed with their thoroughness, which he thought could only have been improved upon through the invocation of an inherent human evil.

When the anti-Earth dissertation ended, the voice was translated to say: “Derek of Earth, the ruling class must determine the degree of detriment caused by your presence. We have already examined your influence on numerous citizens, most significantly your ministry handler.” After a pause: “The ruling class has agreed to allow you to reply to our concerns, since you could not be expected to understand the seriousness of your behaviors and the risk you pose. We are giving you an opportunity to express yourself, nothing more.” Then silence.

Derek spoke English into his mask: “You have condemned all of earth, and I don’t know what I can say to convince you otherwise. But for every greedy, evil and uncaring individual, there is someone else who cares, who gives back, and who embodies the good side of humanity.”

Derek wished that he could understand what the translator made of that. For whatever reason, I could. The bugs heard: ‘Your critique has exposed our planet for what it is. There are humans who hoard, who impose violence and death upon others, and who add nothing to the social good. They hinder humans who believe in the social order, who share, and who hold up a mirror to humanity.’

That wasn’t going well. I tried to tell Derek.

“Thanks,” said Derek. “I figured.”

That was translated, too.

“Ask them to explain the factions that the historian was talking about.”

Derek didn’t respond. He was weighing this against his future survival. Then: “Bugs, if you are to condemn earth, you must have a better system than we do. So explain to me the social good that comes from factions that constantly fight each other, that disagree over the simplest notions of right, like the freedom of sentient aliens like myself, and, more importantly, that fight endlessly over how strict your social order should be.”

No bug replied.

“And what about the belief that everything the ruling class does and says is open, as it is in the rest of society, when you and I know that you are able to communicate privately through your antennae, in undetected conversations that you use to conspire against each other?”

“Your words are garbled,” is all he saw.

He removed his mask and started to speak in Bug. A bug voice superimposed itself over his now unamplified and untranslated voice, saying something about the impulsiveness of mammalian creatures.

He was desperate to break through.

He put on his mask again and said slowly: “In the wasteland, I killed a bug.” The voice stopped, then his words were translated. “I killed a bug by jumping on top of it. I smashed its eyes. I broke both face arms. Then I shot it with a gun.” All this was translated. “I killed the bug because he came to kill me. He was sent by someone here, by one of you, by one of your factions. Somebody wants me dead. Somebody wants me dead!” He removed the mask and repeated that sentence in Bug until the voice superimposed itself again. ‘Humans are undeniably irrational beings,’ it said, ‘their brains bathed in aggressive and selfish hormones from the womb, unable to separate their impulses from rational thought.’

When he put the mask back on, Derek saw: “This session is over” scrolling by repeatedly. He tried another outrageous statement – in this case, “You are hiding another human being from me” – but the overdubbed voice did not relent and he was sure that his own voice was not translated.

Gluck-Bug appeared by his side, and said, “Time to come, earthling. There will be no more provocations from you today.”

They left half of a dung ball with Derek. He wanted so badly to disappear into the illusion of earth, but he had his doubts about this partial dose. Still, better than nothing. He munched it and waited. It relaxed him, though his consciousness was unaffected. Maybe a stroll would help. A bug was waiting just outside the chamber, and when he approached, the bug informed him that he was not to leave the room. Nothing to do but wait until the next session. He tried to ask when that would be in his best Bug, but the guard did not reply.

The boredom finally led him into sleep.

That is when we both landed in early modern Germany. We were facing each other, warily, confused. This had to be Bollum’s doing, but then again all of it had to be him, if anyone or anything. I looked around. It was another cold gloomy German day, hovering just above a frost, with high clouds and a light but chill wind. Something itched at me. I thought at first it was the silence, the complete absence of human hum and activity, but then I realized it was a smell. A light fragrance of burnt wood, wet smoky wood. I did a one-eighty. I had been concentrating on the horizon; behind me was a stand of trees and what seemed like a rocky knoll. Wisps of smoke.

Derek followed me. There was a lightly used trail to an opening on the opposite side of the hill’s rocky crown. I could see hints of flame flickering inside the cave but nothing else.

“We should stay at the entrance until our eyes adjust.”

“Speak for yourself,” said the Bug World denizen. He entered.

I started in when I heard voices.

I stubbed my right foot and almost fell, and then scraped my shoulder at a turn in the entryway. I stopped when I saw a figure stooped over the fire, with Derek across from him. I was ready to run if it turned ugly.

“You’re a hermit?” Derek asked with remarkable nonchalance. In German.

“I live here on my own and have for many days,” the figure said, in a voice I thought I recognized. A German I thought I knew.

“Captain Poulus,” I said out loud when it came to me.

“Who is there that addresses me thus?”

I walked toward the fire. I see a stooped, emaciated and wrinkled version of the man I had known.

“Do I know you?”

“I think you do. It must be many years ago that I came to you and asked about Heinrich from Katzenbach.”

He stopped stirring in a pot hung over the fire, and walked around to get a closer look at me. “You have not aged.”

“Not much,” I replied with a smile.

“You know this being?” asked Derek – I thought at first of me, but he was looking at Poulus.

“I met this – angel – many years ago. I was a captain in the papal army, a respected man, a giant among men. Then I met this person, and he convinced me that none of that mattered, that I should consider my eternal soul, and live as our Savior asked us to live.”

“An angel?” Derek looked at me with incredulity and disgust.

I said: “We worked together to protect the inhabitants of a village. I delivered a message from Heinrich. You remember Heinrich from when we met Bollum.”

“Of course,” said Derek.

“Bollum?” said Poulus. “Is this a name for the divine that I have not yet heard?”

I said: “Bollum is not the divine. Perhaps in his own way a prophet. A saint.”

Derek jumped: “And you gave everything up for this person? Thinking he was an angel?”

“I did,” Poulus said.

“What if I told you he is no angel?”

“Though he stands here thirty years later, not a day older?”

“There is another explanation.”

I walked up to Derek. “Now who is playing?”

Poulus asked: “You are not companions?”

“I think he is my Mephistopheles,” I said.

“And you are Faust?!”

“Ha,” grunted Derek.

“I haven’t sold my soul. And he is no devil. We don’t see eye to eye very often, but we are on the same side.”

“You gave up everything,” said Derek, harping. “What if you knew that it was for a lie? That you sold your soul for a lie?”

“I am a simple man now. I pray, I eat, I work, I excrete, I sleep. There is nothing I miss.”

“But this life is nothing more than a lie built upon a lie.”

“Are you going to tell me the truth, Mephisto?”

Derek looked exasperated. “I don’t even know where to begin. But that life you gave up, in truth it was taken from you by this meddling crap artist. I know the exact feeling. He feeds me crap when I need sustenance.”

Poulus was uncomprehending and therefore unmoved. “Please sit. We will eat soon. I do not have much, but I will gladly share with you.”

I sat down first, Indian legged. Poulus continued to stir and occasionally dropped in small leaves from a stash in a pocket.

I said: “Captain Poulus, I have to ask about Brigitte.”

“Please, do not call me Captain. I am not that man. Call me Richard.”

“Richard, what happened to Brigitte?”

“The harlot?”

“Did she bear you a child?”

“Oh, more than one.”

“Did she – bear one after Heinrich?”

“What is your meaning?”

“Did she have a child with Heinrich?”

“That innocent witch swore to me that Heinrich could not.”

“But – might there have been a child from that day?”

“I don’t know of one,” he said.

“What happened to your children?”

Derek had been silent but now concluded, I could feel and see, that this was his ancestor, the man pictured in his family’s den. But at the same time, he was realizing that, with Poulus a long-time hermit, he may be the offspring of the prostitute after all. He sat down. I could not help thinking: I do get the last laugh.

“The harlot and her children went their own way. I did not keep track.”

“Where did you leave them?”

“We were in southern Germany, I think. Not far from Nuremberg.”

“Were there other women for you? Other children?” Derek asked.

“Other children? Other bastard children? Yes, of course. What of it? I am not proud.”

Derek was visibly relieved, and looked at me when he asked: “Did you marry anyone? Did a mother have your name?”

“I did not marry. Whether any of the women took my name, I do not know.”

Derek seemed satisfied thinking that his ancestor may have been a wanton noble lady.

I asked: “Did one have a portrait of you and Heinrich?”

He looked into the fire intensely for a minute and even then did not look up. “I believe the harlot Brigitte drew one. Not long after Heinrich told me about you.”

“Me?” I asked.

“Yes, the voice from heaven.”

The image did not fade, not when I woke and showered, not even when I sat at the breakfast table and munched cereal and scanned the paper. Doreen came down and rummaged in the cabinets. Once again, I felt full of my nighttime experience, and it only increased my distance to her. I wanted to tell her, but I knew that it would come across as another betrayal of us, so she had to believe I was shallow, if not empty.

I stood up as Doreen sat down, and then Brett entered. He grimaced at his parents, and I left.

That morning at work I considered the scorecard again. If Bollum existed, he was trying to tell me something through his cast of characters: Derek, Heinrich, Poulus, and Brigitte. Maybe they were telling me everything I needed to understand his motives, to find the evidence of his existence. Or maybe I needed the Society to make sense of it. More likely, I should ignore future-him and his endless narratives, and look for evidence of him now. Read science journals for his work. Read UFO blogs for Derek’s story. Read tabloid news for four-footed aliens. Then again, what if Bollum didn’t exist, if none of this was true? Then there were two possibilities: My own brain was collapsing in on itself, or something unknown was manipulating me.

I saw no way out of this dead-end knot of possibilities. I arranged to meet with Kurowitz again, with the hope that he could help me see a next step.

I was pulled out of my reveries by an impromptu meeting with Richard, my boss. “John, gotta sec?” You always know it’s bad when it’s “a sec,” no matter how nonchalant they act. There has to be a manual somewhere that would improve on this routine.

“Have a seat, John. I wanted to talk a bit about your performance review.”

I’ve been doing this job for almost a decade. What’s to discuss?

He set himself gingerly, and then looked at me with a tense expression. “I wanted you to know that you’re going to get a ‘needs improvement’ on your job performance.”

“Okay,” I said without thinking. Then I considered. With the economy as it was, there weren’t any salary increases in the offing, so no big deal. Even so, I was irritated that he had the gumption to give me that label. “John, I know you’re capable of so much more. I’d like this to be a wake-up call for you, okay? Think about what this office needs from you. I want you to surprise me next quarter.” He paused,

shifted a folder. “If we don’t see an improvement, we’re going to have to lay out an employee improvement plan, with specific goals and measurables. And what comes after that, we don’t want to consider.” He gave me the look: don’t dare argue.

Unexpectedly, I had the feeling that maybe an improvement plan wasn’t such a bad idea. But that would have been impossible to explain. “I’ll do better, Richard.” The supplicative tone nauseated me.

“Great. Thanks for coming by.” Now get lost.

Derek was brought before the assemblage again. The purpose was clear enough: discredit the earthling and thereby discredit the religious impulse. Somewhere out there in the hall were those who supported Click-Cluck – or at least those who used her spirituality for their purposes. Derek still couldn’t see antennae so he couldn’t try to identify them through their motion. No one had tried to contact him under Gluck-Bug’s care. He had no idea what the religion faction intended or what they wanted him to do.

He was alone on the stage with Gluck-Bug. The clicking translated on his mask into a twenty-minute recital of religiously motivated or justified pogroms, holocausts and genocides, from Gilgamesh to Moses to David to Saul to Solomon to Pericles to Caesar to Constantine to King John to King Ferdinand to Queen Elizabeth to Napoleon to Bismarck and to, most horribly, the totalitarian murderers who stained the 20th century a deep red.

It has always been the case that most people die without violence. Illness or accident is bad enough to watch, to experience, but one-sided violence is different, being an attack against the spirit that raises our species above the brute conditions of nature. It doesn’t return us to nature: it pushes us below. And when it’s done in the name of a religion, we may have nothing to pull us back out and up, nothing except what little may remain of reason and custom. A weak hand in any game of survival.

Twenty minutes of dozens, hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands, even millions killed. The bugs supplemented the text with a visual parade of hundreds of groups walking, marching, running, and riding to massacre, with knives, swords, machetes, axes, arrows, blunderbusses, crossbows, flintlocks, singleshoots, bayonets, revolvers, repeaters, gatlings, machine guns, cannon, howlitzers, rockets, bombs, napalm, burning phosphorus, nerve gas, even the white hot extrusion of energy from nuclear fission run amok.

Then there were the dead faces the bugs projected inbetween: babies, children, teens, young adults, middle-aged, aging, old, already dying. Imagine any face you have ever seen; you should know that that person has died unjustly at someone’s hands – not that person, of course, but his or her doppelgänger. Every relative, every acquaintance, every clerk at a store, every person waiting at the train station or airport, they have all died too young, in terror, perhaps tortured, most beseeching mercy or knowing that none is coming.

The bugs were not interested in symmetric warfare, which is terrible enough, but the slaughter of the unarmed by the armed, by the sometimes trained but almost always fanatical forces that trace their fury to final causes. We know that the God of the Bible is not above genocide, for his own or his chosen’s sake, and so many have arrogated the same for themselves. I think of the hermit we met in the bloody 17th century and all he had been. To be logically consistent, the argument against violence must be against all kinds, and then the argument is always too quiet, too unassuming, unconvincing. “Turn the other cheek” sounds a lot like self-abnegation, even if the speaker says it only to break a long vicious cycle.

When the show ended, Derek didn’t know how to answer. “What do you want me to respond to?” he asked.

The clicks changed, became someone else’s. “Do you have an explanation for this suffering, something that distinguishes humanity’s religious impulse from these actions, so often committed in its name?”

Derek replied: “I have no explanation, other than to say that humans kill each other for other reasons, too. Religion may be worse than greed or envy only because it is a social organizing principle, not an individual’s motivation.”

“An organizing principle that excludes and divides.”

“As do language, ethnicity, and culture. It doesn’t make sense to isolate this aspect of our civilization. Every cultural principle can be used for good or ill. It’s possible to imagine religion as a purely positive input.”

“But can it be positive if it is a lie, a cultural and linguistic lie, at odds with rationality?”

“Who is to say that it is only a lie?”

“Surely an almighty being would not express itself in a series of writings used to kill, maim, exclude and enslave. Every possible rational analysis leads to the conclusion that humans invented their numerous scriptures to comfort themselves in their own fears, to mask their hopelessness through reference to supernatural beings. Your faiths are only possible if you are willing to accept without question the very truth you need to prove.” A dig at Click-Cluck? Then: “We were surprised to find that the history of your belief is actually the history of disbelief. The Judeo-Christian bible is full of the penalties and costs of losing faith or worshipping emptiness, and the overwhelming loneliness of the true believer. These texts tell a simple story about human civilization: You want nothing more than to believe, but you know how empty such faith is.”

“I suppose,” Derek said. “I doubt I can convince you of anything. But we all have to decide for ourselves what the purpose of life is, don’t we? We all have our own minds. *Die Gedanken sind frei.*” The German wasn’t translated.

“That is a human fallacy. No one decides for him or herself. We can see ourselves only in the context provided by those around us. We make a decision among the possible decisions. Society defines for each of us the acceptable decisions.”

“I can see that, but isn’t everyone still responsible for him or herself in the end? You have to decide for yourself whether to abide by the acceptable. It is possible to live outside. It is still possible to imagine another moral order among the unacceptable choices. And maybe *that* is the order that eliminates violence against its citizens.”

The dialog ended there – at the end untranslated – for the day.

Next morning, Doreen and I happened to sit down across from each other at the breakfast table. I suppose neither thought of a way to end the simultaneity. She gave me a brief glance before looking down at the paper with a studied look of indifference and boredom.

Normally I’m not the one to break us out of one of these destructive loops. She showed no signs of weakening, though.

I wanted to clear my throat but just said through the breakfast milk coating my throat: “I am going to get a ‘needs improvement’ at work.”

She looked up, prepared to smirk at the impertinence of my attempt at small talk. It slowly sank in. Her husband is on report. Before long she looked at me with different eyes, with the assessing and serious eyes I had seen when I had come out of the MRI machine.

“Why?” she asked.

“Not motivated, no initiative. I suppose inattentive.”

“Well,” she said, looking back down at the paper but then resisting the lure of not caring, and putting her eyes on mine, “that is what happens when you are completely preoccupied by other things.” She stopped but I saw: your dreams, your supposed past life – your obsession with my infidelity.

“I guess so,” I said. I didn’t look away or smile or grimace. We kept eye contact, but now I couldn’t read her eyes. Was it a staring contest? Or maybe a test of wills to see who gives up on us first?

“What are you going to do about it, John?” She paused before she went on. “What are *we* going to do about it?”

“I have to get control,” I said.

“How are you going to do that? – What can *I* do to help?”

“I am meeting with Kurowitz one last time. I haven’t told you this, but it turns out that he is a member of the Keepers of the Light. Actually, I think he was recruited for the sole purpose of our experiment with the MRI. He has an interesting perspective on life, I can tell you that. The Derek story in my dreams seems to be coming to an end, or at least to a narrative conclusion. I’ll tell Kurowitz what has happened, and that’ll be the end. If the dreams don’t stop, I’ll try some sleep aids.”

“And psychiatric assistance?”

“Sure,” I said.

“And I want you to invite Barry Moore.”

That caught me off guard. Of course. “Barry ratted me out, didn’t he?”

“It’s called caring.”

“So you want him to hear me say, ‘William, this is the last time’?”

“Yes. I also want him to tell me what he thinks of these Keepers of the Light. He *is* an investigative reporter.”

“Who broke the story of Bigfoot in Chapel Hill.”

“His heart is in the right place.”

“I’ll stipulate that anatomical assertion. And I’ll invite him. I’ll tell him everything I know.”

“Thank you,” she said with some emphasis and nothing else. Just before she stood up, she gave me a short, relieved, even mischievous smile that seared down twenty years into my memory. She left the kitchen. It would have been too much to expect more, so I stayed at the table and pretended to be lost in thought.

The ruling class had reached a verdict. Derek read the sentence on his mask: “For the good of the social order, the earthling will be given the means to return to his world in his own mind.” He felt mixed elation and sadness. Perhaps it was for the best. Let them rot here in their own tomb world, he thought. He would live a full life in his mind and die as fulfilled as anyone could be. There was more coming through: “The bug Click-Cluck will not be allowed to return to the social order, on pain of death. Any bug who repeats her words about a deity will be banned or worse.”

Derek saw what was wrong with the picture he had painted for himself. He owed her more than this capitulation. He was standing on a stage and couldn’t see the hall full of bugs all that clearly. He stepped to the edge of the stage – and then jumped down into the ranks of floating bugs. They parted as he kept walking. He took off the mask, which was warning him about disrupting a general session of the ruling class. The antennae around him were flailing out of sync. He heard buzzing and a cacophony of clicks all around him, but couldn’t pick out anything. As he walked he became aware of bugs following behind him, at a height and distance, probably waiting for orders to swoop and detain. Then something hit his eye, a glowing red spot. It was at a distance to the right. It hit again. He headed toward it.

He walked through a parting sea of bugs to the source. He saw a flashlight in the hand of one bug, and was also suddenly aware that the antennae for this group of bugs were undulating in unison. He had finally done what they had hoped for.

‘Please protect me,’ he said in his best Bug.

The bug in front of him said something, but he couldn’t make it out. He put his mask back on. It said: “You have sanctuary with us.”

The whole section of bugs turned and made for an exit. It wasn’t marked on Derek’s display, but he saw it open and they all passed through. Derek had to set himself down on all fours. After crawling for

several yards, he emerged into a fully lit cavern holding a few hundred bugs arrayed at various heights. No signals were indicated in his display.

A bug approached with another mask. This one looked like an ancient Greek warriors mask, golden and stylized but still recognizably human. He handed over the mask he had been using and put the new one on. The display lit up a rich 3D environment with text flowing over various bugs. He now had their back-channel communication.

The bug with the red dot pointer said: “Earthling, we haven’t much time to answer your questions in privacy. You’ll need to use your voice; we’ll answer on this screen.”

Derek opened a pouch. “I have a document from the historian. He never told me a name – in any case, you probably know how I am with your names. I am supposed to find the bug who has been conversing with him.”

One of the bugs – swarthy like the historian himself – scooted forward. “I am that bug.”

He held out his face hand, but Derek did not immediately hand over the document. “I don’t know how to make sure that you are the right recipient.”

“I understand. You don’t want to fail in your mission.”

“Yes,” Derek answered, although he was thinking of the more difficult one that Click-Cluck had charged him with.

“Look at the document. Your screen will make sense of it. It will say that this is a chronicle of a particular faction – I don’t know what your screen will do with the name. It is our faction.”

Derek opened the scroll. The screen translated in glowing letters. Derek glanced at the first exposed section, which began by describing him and his meeting the leader of the faction, almost as it happened, including the red beacon. He unrolled a few pages worth and realized it was rolled up in reverse chronological order. Somewhere around the fourth unrolled page there was a sentence: “Click-Cluck sold most of her antennae, which continued to function despite the electronic interference that the ruling class had imposed on the outlands; the faction had succeeded in extending their backchannel.”

“Is that what this is all about? Click-Cluck was banished to get her special antennae to sympathetic bugs in the outlands?”

The bug responded: “That was just a benefit.”

“Did you create her antennae?”

“Yes,” he said, “of course.”

Derek didn’t ask the next obvious question: could he talk to her right now?

He scanned several more pages, nothing of which stood out to him. Non-sensical letter combinations doing this and that, celebrating, decrying, dying. New members accepted. Nothing more than a chronicle.

Was it a trap? But for whom?

He handed over the document.

“What now?”

“We can answer some of your questions. We must hurry, though. It will not be long before someone will be listening to you.”

“Click-Cluck gave me a question to ask of the bug who gave her her antennae.”

“Then share that question with us.”

“I am to share it only with that bug. Whoever it is. No one else.”

There was a change. Derek’s back channel was turned off. This was an understandable caution, but he was suspicious. Certain antennae began to whip.

Then he was tapped back in. The leader said: “All right. You and I can go into the tunnel.”

As they moved into the corridor, Derek had a vision of jumping the bug and twisting his face arms and getting the truth. But how could that violence guarantee the truth?

Instead, he deflected: “Click-Cluck said that once I find the bug I should wait one day.”

“Why would she say that?”

“Because, I suppose, she knew I could be wrong.”

“But you could be right, and in one day the secrecy could be lost.”

“Maybe,” he said, “secrecy was never the point.”

“Then seeking me out makes no sense. Why not ask from where she is?”

What’s more, Derek thought, why ask at all? She had finally told Derek her question in the bat cavern where he had met with the historian. She tapped out the question in their secret code. There could be no safer exchange, but what are the odds that no one had observed them?

It all depended on how badly they needed to know. But they already knew the question. Everyone knew what she wanted to learn; there was really no mystery there. So why the theater?

Exactly because of the theater, Derek realized as he stood there. He himself was part of the performance, if not the leading role to her supporting one. “We wait one day.” He had made up the condition, but it suited him, and he knew she would approve.

At dinner, Doreen was back to being suspicious and defensive, or maybe I was. The morning was a flashback for both of us. She had seen a vulnerable me, the guy who had years before freaked her out, who was hopelessly dependent on her good will. She had once made up her mind to give him another chance, out of openness, generosity and gratitude, and this morning had brought that moment back. The mental wormhole could only last so long, though. Her manner said: You can’t keep relying on activating the old good will.

“The dreams are becoming more real every night,” I said. I suppose I was hoping to connect again. Or show my appreciation.

“I know,” she said.

I must have looked surprised.

“You shake and sweat and sometimes you mumble. It’s a marvel that you don’t wake up.”

I asked, mildly hopeful but with self-irony: “You watch me?”

“I move to the edge of the bed. If it’s really bad I get up.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, seeing for the first time the life that took place as I dreamt. “Why don’t you wake me up?”

“I used to try, but you just mumble more. It’s not worth it.”

“I could move downstairs.”

“Right,” she said with a tone that held a spectrum: resignation, annoyance, grit, and defiance.

I said, “I think it’s almost over.” I chose to believe that no other story was waiting for me after Derek’s mission, though I had no reason to be sure.

She didn’t respond but I saw a hint of a nod.

The faction meeting broke up. Derek’s vehicle was brought so he could follow the faction leader, whom we’ll call Dock-Guck, to his chambers. Perhaps it was chance, but I think Derek expected what he found: he put his hand into the electronically obscured storage compartment, and there his fingers felt a slug of some kind. He felt a click as he touched it. He cradled it in a hand and brought it up to his face. A mechanical chattering told him to slip into his ear, nonchalantly as he could.

“... not in danger. But be aware that this faction did not provide Click-Cluck’s antennae. Their purpose in intercepting the question is unknown. You must give them a false question. We will contact you again with details of a plan to get you out of their control. Do not despair. And know this: there is another human being on Bug World.”

Derek stopped breathing for a minute, then gulped air. He wanted to shout, “I knew it!” But then again, he didn’t know anything. These were just words so far. The device stopped working and in a few minutes collapsed in on itself, fell out of his ear and presumably went to the bottom of the tunnel.

The other bugs peeled off as they entered smaller and smaller tunnels. Finally, Dock-Guck and Derek were released directly into the leader’s antechamber. A bug on the ground greeted them and invited Derek to dismount. The leader did so as well. Derek followed them into a room with a food trough, where they sat and ate in silence. After a leisurely meal, a bowl of dung balls was passed to him. Derek tried to ask with his best Bug for something that would not send him back to earth, and they eventually understood: they took away the balls and brought not the slime ball that had almost killed him, but a greenish liquid on a patch of something like paper. Dock-Guck took one and licked the patch clean. Derek did the same.

While he waited to see what this did to him, he asked: “Do you know my question?”

“Your question?” the leader said. “I know a number of questions. But you probably mean whether you are alone here as an earthling, a mammal, a human. Yes?”

“Yes,” he said.

“There is no other human living on this planet,” the leader said.

But then a new secret channel flashed on his mask, looking like it had been hacked in: “Wait patiently, I can show you another.” Was it a plant?

“All right,” he said, trying not to react.

After a pause, Derek asked: “Do you believe in God, some kind of God?”

“There is no concept of God in our worldview,” Dock-Guck said. The flash: “You ask a dangerous question. Is that Click-Cluck’s question?”

“Then why does the world exist?” he asked, ignoring the back channel.

“It exists because it exists.”

“Are we stuck with tautologies? What meaning do you find in life?”

“We create meaning, earthling. It has always been that way.”

“But can you control the meaning you create? Can’t we just keep digging deeper for meaning? And if there’s no end to the digging, then who can say there isn’t a God behind it somewhere?”

“When we say we create our meaning, we mean that first principles are always based on the welfare of the bug, not some external will or greater purpose. We engage in what you call ethics.” Another back-channel question: “Are you ready to share the message from Click-Cluck? Say yes if so and we will find a way to be unobserved.”

“My question,” said Derek, “is: can your society be ethical if it kidnapped me from my world? And if that was unethical, how can you be so sure that what you do now isn’t as tainted as what those bugs did then?”

“We have learned from the past and we weigh our actions. We are inevitably imperfect, but dedicated to our cause and order.”

“The three rings,” Derek said, feeling a flush from the liquid. “Can I tell you a story?”

The leader came in as Derek ate that morning. As elsewhere, these bugs supped once a day, but they were responsive to his cycle. The bug padded in with two other bugs, large but not as scraped-up as thugs might be. Perhaps the minimum of protection against a confessed bug killer.

“Your story of a father and three sons does not make sense to me.”

Derek was surprised. The evening was a blur; the liquid had a milder effect, something like Valium, but it also made everything seem quite distant that morning.

Dock-Guck went on: “The motivation for each is to know that he has the one true ring, and yet what you are saying is that the proof of riches is created by the motivation. A circular action, inefficient and contingent. True to form for humans.”

“We like to think of it as a progression.”

“Control according to a plan is simpler and more assured,” Dock-Guck said.

Derek thought that was self-ironic, but then he realized that it was a self-evident truth for the bug ruling class. And that sensibility was hard to argue with – so much simpler than letting decisions be formulated in every possible head.

“Like every other idea in your society,” the leader said, “it is born from the sense of deprivation. You posit need, which creates motivation and thereupon motivation eliminates need. But this is because you see no other way forward. It is a cycle of finding hope in hopelessness that we can barely conceptualize.”

Derek decided not to respond.

“I would like you to see something today. Please come.”

Immediately the leader led him out to the antechamber, where they mounted their vehicles. They reversed the route from the day before. They ran into a bug going the other way, and I got to see how their perfect transportation system froze under a simple crossing of paths. The lead bugs from both directions reversed and then came forward at the same time. Finally the other bug backed out, with Dock-Guck and the rest just behind him. He peeled off just as soon as the train reached a larger tunnel. The bug party jumped into the stream and moved to the right and into a tunnel heading away from the residential area.

Derek slept some and woke when he bumped against a fellow traveler. Shortly thereafter, the party moved to the side of the tunnel, slowed, and exited through an opening in the ceiling. They entered a large chamber with numerous tunnel openings. Bugs floated this way and that. It reminded Derek of a shopping mall or a hospital. The leader led Derek into a tunnel while the rest stayed behind. They followed a path that was marked in Derek’s mask by a luminous white line on the tunnel floor. They continued through several forks.

At the end they entered a small antechamber and dismounted. Derek had to crawl through a small entrance and low tunnel. At the end a light came up slowly as they approached.

They entered and Derek understood instantly.

It was a sarcophagus of sorts, roughly in the shape of a human. More the outline of a massive Yeti. With a whoosh the lid split open down the middle and the two halves lowered and disappeared into the pedestal. The leader did nothing so Derek knew it was up to him. He went forward and began uncovering the shape. He unwrapped layer after layer of gauze and woven sheet. Finally he could see tubes and connective pieces. A few more layers and he could see the skin, then distinguish the hair color and see where the tubes terminated over her mouth, nose, eyes, and ears. There were more attachments on her arms and chest and below.

The last layer felt different, like a cloth of wire. Her skin was as pale as his, but her blood coursed near the surface and made her teint reddish in a way that promised vitality. Her muscles were not atrophied; her whole look was a bit plump, not unattractive though not especially feminine. She looked relaxed, at peace.

“She is in stasis,” said the leader. “She is comatose but dreaming, with a good deal of brain activity and no symptoms of distress. She is back on earth, living the life that was taken from her.”

Derek believed him. “Did she choose this life?”

“She did, in the sense that she never acclimatized to our world. It was the appropriate thing to do.”

Derek asked: “Why are you showing her to me now? Why couldn’t I know this earlier?”

Dock-Guck said: “The commission for earth matters decided that her survival must be kept secret until we knew more about you and what you might do. The decision became permanent after we saw what an explosive force you had become. . . At the very least, you needed to mature before you could understand her best interests and let them trump your desire for companionship.”

“I may not be mature enough yet,” he said with a crack in his voice, although I know he intended to do nothing.

They stayed by her side for several minutes. The only other exchange:

“Is there any way for me to communicate with her?”

“She can probably hear your voice right now. You can tell her what it means to you to find another human.”

Derek shook his head for a moment, then rummaged at her side. He lifted the still specially wrapped hand, took it between his two hands, and gave it a gentle, steady squeeze. He said a few cooing words. Several minutes later he put her hand back and replaced the coverings one after another.

He did not address the bug again, not until they had returned to the antechamber. “I understand what you did,” he said with a hitch in his voice, before mounting for the ride back.

Part 5

If they thought they had neutralized Derek through their act of kindness, they were seriously mistaken. All it did was free him. Freed me, too.

I wasn't fazed when I heard the message that Barbara left on the answering machine. "Hi John." Sounding a bit sheepish, but if there was a sense of guilt she kept it to herself. "I had a dream I have to tell you about. I wasn't trying at all, but I dreamt of someone named Bridgette, who lived in Elizabethan times in Germany. Nuremberg, I think, wherever those trials were. A dame with children, some grown, some young. She wasn't so much beautiful, but there was something about her. She was tall, big boned, the generous proportions of someone who enjoyed her life. But I saw such a sullenness in her eyes, a furtiveness. She wanted to talk to you, it was like she knew you. I have rarely had such an extraordinarily clear dream. Extraordinary." She paused. "Something you could pass on to Helmut or some other German-sounding name. She gave me the message to pass on to him. 'Your son,' she said. 'Your son.' That was the whole message. I hope this helps you."

Heinrich's son? But was it me to whom this should matter, or Derek?

And how crazy is that, anyway. She called with the exact message I was looking for. Authentic transmission? I might have thought so back when I was channeling Heinrich, and I might have wanted to believe it just a week ago, but not now. Was it the power of suggestion, at which she herself so excelled? Was the idea fed to her by the Society's illuminati, disguised as intelligence from the Dark Knights? Did the Dark Knights have sources in the Society? What did any of them want me to do with this?

Or was this Bollum at work?

Every bit of intelligence just raised more questions for me, and I still needed some way to deal with it, to protect myself. On this day I got inspiration from Derek. I swore to be unpredictable, unhumiliated, unsullied.

That night, I found myself in the cube I had seen in a previous dream, deep in intergalactic space. I followed robots in – fewer this time – and surveyed the half-darkened facility. When I got to the troughs of brain matter, I saw that whole sections had died and turned brown. Robots were scooping the brown mass out and pouring something like concrete in its place. I watched for a long time. Always a square foot at a time. This made me think: So – each is one of Bollum's millions of lives? What if he is not an individual but a hive-human? And his hive is already dying? Is there a real Bollum somewhere in this giant facility? Which Bollum did I know?

I went to the eye matrix. The majority of trays were empty. More questions: Would the death of the last eye signify the end of humanity? Or would it be more correct to say that humanity had died millions of years before, kept in memory only by this industrialized bastard?

"Heinrich's son?" repeated Derek. "You're saying he's my ancestor after all?"

"Well, we don't know who she meant," I said. "Maybe you are his descendent after all, maybe I am. But I think there is a different point. Who is the *real* ancestor here? Who had to raise this child or these children? Not Heinrich. Not Poulus. It was her. *She* is the ancestor we should be drawing a line to, because without her intercession probably both our lines would be dead and forgotten. If Barbara is to be believed, Brigitte is the key."

"If she is the key, why can't we talk to her? Why do we talk to Heinrich and Poulus, but not her? Why are we talking to each other?"

"Maybe she doesn't want to talk to someone who writes her off as a prostitute."

He didn't answer, so I added for both our sakes: "Or maybe because of the story we needed to share."

“And that’s so interesting, why?” he said with a load of sarcasm and some self-doubt.

“Bollum wanted your story told, and he wanted you to experience it being told. I don’t know why. Holding up his side of the bargain, maybe. A sense of responsibility beneath all that misdirection and game playing. And it would just match his sense of humor, if not dramatic irony, if a distant cousin of yours did the telling.”

After a silence, one that I left for him to break, he said: “This might be the last time.”

“I know,” I said. By the next day he may be in his own sarcophagus, playing pharaoh in his own distinctive form of afterlife. The next day? In reality he’s still on earth or not far away.

A few minutes later, the leader came into his room. Derek couldn’t stall out any longer. He had to tell Dock-Guck the question if he wanted their protection and the best chance of returning to earth in his mind. The non-thug bugs accompanied the leader; no lashing out here.

After some small talk, his host said: “You must tell me the question if I am to help you.”

“I fully intend to tell you her question. But don’t you already know the question? You could guess it easily enough. Or you probably saw her tap it out on my arm, in our code. Why does the question matter to you, given all that?”

His back channel access dropped and then returned again.

“The question only matters,” he said, “because Click-Cluck was so insistent. We do not understand her strategy, so we decided to be the first to hear it. Perhaps we will be able to deduce the real meaning before it has an impact.”

“You aren’t the faction that built her antennae.”

Drop out and back in.

“We are not. Actually, they used our linguistic design but someone else modified antennae.” Pause. “Do not forget that we are the faction that has cared for your fellow human these many months.”

“You realize that by wanting me to give you the question, you may be answering her question?”

“Yes, that is possible.”

“Then you really don’t need to hear me ask the question.”

“I must know it as you know it. It is necessary to reduce uncertainties.”

“And if I don’t tell you?”

“Then it may be that you will never return to earth.”

“Maybe I don’t want to.”

“There are no guarantees in our world. You may find yourself condemned to an existence – or non-existence – not of your choice.”

“Fair enough... If you let me pose the question to the bug who modified her antennae, then I will let you hear the question.”

“How would you know who modified them?”

“I don’t know. But they know me, and I suspect they will be willing to come and hear the question directly.”

“They may choose not to expose themselves.”

“Take me to room where we first met. If they don’t come today, then I will pass the question on to you alone.”

Dock-Guck and his hidden conferees discussed and agreed. The whole entourage headed to the ruling class chamber, but only Derek and Dock-Guck stayed in the empty cavern. Time passed very slowly for Derek, since he had nothing to say to the leader. After a long silence a bug emerged from the chamber tunnel. The bug was walking on his feet and there were no signals emanating from his antennae.

When he reached them, Derek could tell that he was ancient: brown-to-black, wrinkled, a gait like a well-oiled machine that had moved on the same shock absorbers for too long.

The arriving bug spoke: “Click-Cluck will not be pleased.” Derek assumed that the presence of Dock-Guck was meant.

“Actually,” said Derek, “I think this is exactly what she wants.”

“You were to ask the question of me only.”

“Ask only of you, yes, but that didn’t mean that others couldn’t listen. She knew there would be no ruling-class privacy for me. She doesn’t care about that. She wanted to know who cared about her question, and she wanted to hear your response. In public. So – we’re giving her exactly what she was after.”

“If you believe so. I’m sure there is no reasoning with an earthling. Ask the question.”

Derek repeated it in his mind to make sure he had the formulation, then said: “Do you believe what you recited to Click-Cluck through her antennae?”

The bug turned to go, as if to say, I never agreed to answer. But then he said: “Of course. I know that it is the truth that our social order needs.”

“That sounds like hedging to me,” said Derek.

He turned back. “Hedging does not translate. Do you mean that it is not unequivocal? If so, then yes, it is not. We believe, within the constraints of the society that we have created. We make no excuses for our belief or for our society.”

“But Click-Cluck believes literally that she was chosen, spoken to by a divine presence, whereas you know who spoke to her. Can you conscience that deception?”

“Deception is a strong word in our language, meaning that one has become unrealistic. We are realists to the extreme. Everything we dedicate ourselves to is real, including our belief in the deity.”

“Do you really believe that you can speak for God?”

“We do not speak for God. We have passed on what we have kept sacred for millennia. The scripture has been with us since before history began. Now all bugs are able to hear God’s words for themselves. Click-Cluck added the last book herself.”

“How did you choose her?”

“She was – available. Choose is a strong word.”

“Why bring me into this?”

“Your world helped her to understand the nature of a deity’s relationship to a world.”

“What’s next?”

“Click-Cluck has journeyed to the surface. She is purifying herself in preparation for returning to our society, to begin her work of testifying to our God.”

“She will be killed.”

Silence on the bug’s part. They want their martyr.

Derek: “I will tell her not to come.”

“She cannot hear you.”

Derek sighed to quell the rage, and set off on a different tack. “Can you tell me how old you are?”

“I can,” the wizened bug said. But he did not.

“Can you believe that I speak with a human who is a billion years old?”

‘Perhaps in your mind, earthling.’

“That is true. This billion year-old human has a technology that lets him speak to intelligent creatures anywhere in the universe, at any time. I would not be surprised if he has spoken with some bugs – I’m actually quite sure of it. He appears as a voice in the mind.”

The bug turned away again. ‘This story has nothing to do with us. We know who dictated our scriptures. Not a time-bending humanoid.’

“That may be true. But if there is any shred of truth to what I’m saying, then you must also be open to this: a universe full of highly evolved creatures, whose technology must make them seem ethereal or godlike to any less sophisticated creature. When you’re weighing the pros and cons of believing in a

God – making your own God equation – then you have to include a term to account for the universal evolution of intelligence. Without that error term, your equation is just spitting out noise.”

He responded: “Faith swallows all error terms and reduces them to insignificance.” He phrased it in religious terms, but to Derek it sounded like an article of faith of the ruling class itself.

Derek responded: “That makes faith seem like the ultimate white noise. But that might be the best definition yet. Something like: we are forced to listen to the indiscriminate noise of this universe, and it drives us so crazy that we begin to recognize melodies, tunes and words in it. Faith is hearing a concert in the noise.”

“You leap from one non-sensical conclusion to the other,” the bug said as he finally padded away. “But you are at least a good companion for yourself.”

Apparently that is something like an insult in Bug.

Dock-Guck said after he was gone: “I would like to know more about this time traveler.”

Derek shrugged. “He doesn’t travel physically. He projects his thoughts into my mind.”

“Then – that voice is also indistinguishable from insanity?”

Derek chuckled. “You got it.”

One more night, I thought. One more night to finish this procession of others’ lives. One more night to find resolution. One more night before I try to get my life together. One more night before Doreen sleeps soundly and undisturbed. The repetition was meant to bolster me.

We were eating dinner. Brett didn’t leave right away, started fussing with his phone. Doreen finally recognized what was going on, and she got up and disappeared for a bit.

“Dad,” Brett said, “can you tell me something?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Are you still involved with the Keepers of the Light?”

“Only tangentially. I don’t think you’ve ever met Dr. Kurowitz, who examined me a couple times. Turns out he is in touch with the Society. We’ve also gotten together a couple times. But that’s as much as I’ve been involved, and I’m going to meet him one more time, then that’s it.”

“Oh,” he said, stood, dropped his phone in a pocket and walked away, hands tucked in pockets.

I sat for a couple minutes trying to divine what that was about.

When Doreen came back, she went to the sink to rinse some dishes.

“Amelia,” she said of a sudden, and looked back over her shoulder at me. A hint of a conspiratorial smile.

Of course. I pictured an unexpected return of interest on her part and his suspicion of some covert purpose.

But here we were, Doreen and I, almost facing off in the kitchen. I didn’t have any conversation starters. I wasn’t sure what she was doing at work, whether her book club was meeting, if she was feeling well. Our options were so limited, and with that one word Doreen had taken option number one off the table. Go for a walk? Take in a play? Sit with a glass of wine? Go to a club? It all sounded so hackneyed, so different than our atrophied routine that it would immediately stop her – she would glance, put on that satirical smile and wait for me to realize the absurd and over-reaching quality of what I had suggested. There was no way out of that.

Twenty seconds too many passed, and I started to move my body in frustration, as if every inch had an itch. I felt hooded and gagged. Nothing to say.

She looked back at me and then turned around. Not yet a smile.

“What is the matter, John?”

I stopped fidgeting and put my hands on the table. “I am frustrated because I can’t think of anything intelligent to say.”

“You don’t need to think of something intelligent to say.” She stopped and replayed that in her mind. “Okay, that sounded wrong. Let’s just talk.”

“Can we talk and do something that’ll help with my nerves?”

“What would you like to do?”

After some thinking: “How about we go to the book store and get a coffee?” That seemed like it would appeal, but she looked hesitant. We couldn’t really talk – too public?

“Or we could go for a walk.”

That didn’t seem right to her either. Did we need to sit tête-à-tête?

Then she surprised me altogether. “There’s a movie I’ve been looking forward to. Maybe we could see that, and have a coffee afterwards?”

“Absolutely,” I said and readied myself to stand. Sometimes I can’t help these actions, that echo what my mind has decided, as if my body were just a prop. I covered with a nonchalant question: “What movie?”

Dock-Guck was blunt. They had prepared a sarcophagus for Derek, and they expected him to enter it that night. “You’ll be home for dinner,” he said, as if that would seal the deal. “I want to talk one more time with Click-Cluck,” Derek replied. Dock-Guck: “Impossible. We have no communication with her. We believe she perished on the surface.”

Impossible back at you, thought Derek. He and she could not have made it through so much so that her surface excursion – for which she surely must have been prepared – could end abruptly. Unless her equipment was sabotaged. Or she was met by agents sent to kill her. To prevent martyrdom here in bug society.

“All right,” he said, “I agree to all your conditions. But first I want to accept any gifts that any bugs may bring me. I want to wait until the morning.”

“Gifts?”

“Yes, should any bug have something to give me before I return to earth.”

“What sense would there be to give you something just before you leave? It cannot go with you.”

“What sense, indeed,” said Derek. He smirked to think how that might be translated.

“All right, the morning.”

“You will let any bug come to me.”

Back channel silence, then: “Any bug.”

Unfortunate phrasing, Derek realized, as he visualized an assassin being ushered in by Dock-Guck himself.

Early in the morning, Derek became aware of a bug in his chamber. He slipped the mask back on and saw that this bug had no electronic signal on it. The bug approached, face arm outstretched, something held in the fingers. Derek put out his hand and the bug dropped an earplug onto it. Derek held it up to his face and heard the characteristic chatter. He put it into his ear, and the bug padded out.

Click-Cluck was reciting the scripture. There was no doubt in his mind that this was her click and pop. Distinguishing features? Derek would tell you there was an intelligence and passion in the way this click or that buzz was held or chopped. He could tell her size from the pitch – there was no gender differentiation in expression, but there were differences in the ancillary use of buzzing. Click-Cluck was not a big buzzer, using it just where needed. She avoided some trendiness in expression, but that also gave a dignified, even solemn impression. How then passion? The higher notes of her clicks were strong but abrupt. The lower notes were softer but held just an instant longer. The effect was clear to Derek, but invisible to me.

‘Click-Cluck?’ he said into the stream.

It slowly faded out and was replaced by white noise. Eventually Derek recognized that the noise was interspersed with Bug, and that the noise itself was the effect of the buffeting of wind and storm. She had contacted him from the surface.

“Click-Cluck, I have posed your question.”

‘Thank you, Derek. I have asked a lot of you – I know the choice you are facing.’

“And what choice are *you* facing?”

‘I have no choice. I must believe in this thing.’

“Is the historian with you?”

‘He has made – other choices.’

“Will you see him again?”

‘No.’

“Will I see you again?”

‘If it is destined.’

“I will wait for you.”

‘Do not wait for me. The best, safest choice is that you do as they have decreed.’

“I will dream of earth and never see you again.”

‘Never is a long time,’ Click-Cluck answered. There was a touch of earth humor in that. ‘Derek, keep your earplug and we will contact you on earth when the circumstances are right. You will know what to do.’

“Somehow,” he replied, “I never know what to do.”

‘And yet you have always been right. How else could we have arrived at this singular, beautiful moment?’

Part 6

I woke feeling my ear. Is there something in there? My last memory from the dream was of Derek falling asleep in the sarcophagus. His last memory.

Oh my God, I thought in a sudden sweat. I am Derek sleeping.

That Friday I went straight from work to downtown Chapel Hill. Parking was as bad as ever. The denizens were the usual. You see an assortment of homeless people, crazy or playing crazy, pushing the limits on panhandling in the hope of shaking a little more loose. Middle-aged men and women in UNC livery, as if wearing a sign: “Those were the best years of my life.” Hipster locals who love to unnerve pampered college students. Students who think coming from bigger cities makes them cosmopolitan. Organic types venturing out of their Carrboro enclave. Repressed-looking middle-aged men, perhaps no different from me, looking furtively around themselves, longing to see what they surmise is happening just out of their sight. You could see the occasional Barry Moore, the iconoclastic individual with a taste in fashion on the edge of self-irony. The list goes on arbitrarily long: Short-fused taxi cab drivers. Disheveled pizza chefs. Stutter-stepping computer geeks. Hands-in-pockets kids wanting nothing more than to skip the five years before their independence. Goth youths of indeterminate age. The occasional professorial type with that peculiar combination of confusion and self-awareness. I just wanted to get to the Top of the Hill, swill, confess and leave.

I was waiting at the light at Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Franklin. Turns were being allowed from one direction or the other, but no one was going. I wanted to start across. The light with us changed to green, but the crosswalk signal didn't. Was it broken? There were others at the corner, not moving, so probably not. A turn signal directing traffic through our crosswalk went red. Okay, I thought, I am going.

If time had somehow slowed, if I had stopped myself to ask what my senses were telling me, if I had let myself feel even an inkling of the caution that says, these things come when you least expect them... Then I might have heard the engine roaring, seen the grill to my left jump a bit, glanced over to wonder what that hayseed was doing, like everyone else did. But I was oblivious, moments from death, wrapped up in the drama playing out in my head.

Then a hand grabbed my collar. I had taken a half step but I was suddenly leaning back and away from the lifted foot. I lurched backwards two steps. The hand helped me stop there. People parted and wondered if I was drunk. The hand let go.

I turned and saw Barry Moore. “What the hell!” is all I could say.

He gestured with his head at the pickup, which was accelerating and turning onto MLK in a single roar. Two seconds passed, the vehicle was zooming away, and I finally realized that Barry might have just saved my life.

“A thank-you will do,” he said smugly.

“What just happened?” I asked, though I understood full well, everything except whether I had just escaped an accident – or something quite different.

“You tell me, Densch,” he replied. “How many enemies do you have?”

I said: “I don't have any like that.” But I thought: maybe I do.

“Suit yourself. I'll walk a few steps behind you, though, if you don't mind.”

“Ha ha,” I said.

We crossed on the next walk signal. I had the feeling that a lot of eyes were following me. Wondering just how oblivious I was? Wondering why someone would want to run me down? Or was I completely wrong, just a sign that I was at least as self-obsessed as anyone else out here?

I followed Barry up the stairs, and surveyed the joint to find Kurowitz. Of course he was not there. We were told there were no tables outside, so we took one in the middle of the chaos. Just as we were about to sit down, I saw Kurowitz pop into view from the terrace. He signaled and we went outside.

Barry introduced himself and Kurowitz grunted.

“This is all completely off the record,” he said. “No articles, or I walk.”

I replied: “Barry is here as my friend. Actually, he is representing my wife, for whatever reason.”

“She deserves a voice at the table,” said Barry.

“I guess,” I said.

“If it’s going to put your life at risk, I’d say so.”

Kurowitz’s eyes widened, and he looked at me as if to say, why are you feeding him lies?

I shrugged and said: “I almost got run over by a pick-up truck just outside. Barry thinks they were aiming at me.”

“Aiming at you? Now that’s rich,” he said, smiling, and he took a large quaff.

The waitress came and stood at the table. “What will it be?”

I ordered a draft beer, and Barry ordered an espresso and a sherry.

“Rich?” Barry said with a look at Kurowitz that told us both: no prisoners, no promises.

“Rich, as in ridiculous. Why would anyone choose to run anyone over, on a public street, in a busy intersection, in broad daylight? It doesn’t make sense.”

“What the average person believes makes no sense, already has the advantage of being camouflaged in their eyes.”

“John, I agreed to meet with you,” said Kurowitz with exaggerated patience, “and then I agreed to let an acquaintance of yours join us. I am not interested in contesting someone’s conspiracy theories.” He stopped and stared at me.

“By all means,” Barry said, as if flinging his dueler’s gloves to the table, “let’s not contest conspiracy theories. Let’s just be clear about what you’re selling, shall we?”

“I’m selling nothing.”

“The Keepers of the Light? A secret society that traces itself back to the Illuminati? A group dedicated to the proposition that humans will become eternal beings and that the catalyst will be cheap, abundant energy, like that described in the meandering writings of our mutual friend here?”

“As I said, I’m not selling anything. I see some of our tenets are known to you, therefore I don’t need to belabor that we are a peaceful organization and that our members believe in an inclusive, non-violent and transcendental singularity, one which will benefit all of humankind.”

“All of humankind? That is not exactly how the Dark Knights see it. They believe that your kind will do anything and sacrifice anyone in order to achieve this singularity in your lifetimes.”

“That is a bastardization of what the Society believes.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“All right,” Barry said, and he pulled a half-sized manila envelope from his jacket – he must have been cradling it there the whole time. He opened the seal and pulled three folded sheets of paper. The first was an online news article from a local paper in Exeter, England. The second was a Google map. And the third was a brief email, which I quickly recognized as my email to Barry. “Bastardization? It took me all of one hour to find out how your benevolent organization reacted to the breach of its security, when one of its members called and gave John a clue to help him find the meaning of his visions.”

Kurowitz quickly read the article and then pushed it away. The headline was: “Local man found dead with ritualistic markings.” The article concluded: “Police were investigating the meaning of a series of numbers scrawled across the deceased’s forehead, but would not speculate on origin or intent.”

“And?” I said.

“And – a little farther on they write that there were six numbers written on his forehead. John, how many numbers did the voice give you, which allowed you to find a place in Kenya that could be associated with the Bollum story, which would also mean that in fact Bollum exists and therefore perhaps also his mythical energy source? Given to you so that you could expose this whole conspiracy and undo its efforts to keep so much a secret?”

“Six numbers,” I said. Still pretty tenuous, I thought.

Kurowitz harrumphed. “That shows nothing more than that you are a creative conspiracist. Again, it’s patently absurd to carry out an act of revenge in such a public way.”

“Ah,” said Barry, “but what is out in the open is hidden once again. Who would know the context? No one but a provincial American or two, and the sworn members of the Society that had been so severely betrayed. And they would understand quite well what this meant. Quite effective, if you ask me.”

“If you say so.” Kurowitz gave him a look, though, the kind that says, you have no idea where I could take this.

“What do you say we send an email to the investigators, asking them if our numbers are the same as what they found? Do you think they might find that interesting?”

“Feel free,” he said, gesturing with his hand, inviting Barry to leave now.

“I would be happy to, but I’ll defer to John. It’s his life that will fly apart.”

“I just want my life *back*,” I said. Both looked at me with a bit of disdain.

“All right,” Kurowitz said. “We’re actually here to listen to John. What can you tell me about your recent dreams?”

I told him everything, finishing with: “I can’t help but think that I am Derek, dreaming. I am his dream.”

“Interesting,” he said. “What do you do with the fact that this world is real?”

“What I do with that,” I said, “is conclude that it isn’t. That’s not so hard if you have a reasonable alternative.”

“*A human dreaming your life on an alien planet* is a reasonable alternative?”

“Oh, chasing a figmentary Bollum because he promises eternal life is reasonable, and Derek dreaming me isn’t?”

“We are not hypothesizing a completely alternate reality to the one you and I experience. We are only extending it.”

Barry said: “Venn allee men schen stat dare aw-ghen groone Glayser hetten...”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Kurowitz asked in a huff.

Barry sipped from his espresso. “Heinrich von Kleist. An adherent of Kant describing the dilemma of perception to his girlfriend. ‘If all people had green glasses instead of eyes, they would be unable to decide if what they see is real. And it’s the same way with what we call the truth. We have no way to decide if truth is true, or if it just seems that way.’”

“Unfettered relativism,” muttered Kurowitz.

“Wait,” I said, “aren’t you the guy who used statistics to convince me that this world is less knowable than any of us think?”

“I am,” he replied. “But it is one thing to invoke complexity. It’s quite another to question the basis of concepts, including complexity.”

“Spoken like the lackey you are.”

“Sir, I take exception!” He tried to puff himself up as much he could and moved his beer glass carefully to the side, as if they were going to engage in fisticuffs across our small table.

Barry replied: “Take all the exceptions you want. It won’t change anything about the power relations that actually define your precious science.”

“Unbelievable,” Kurowitz said, still expressing his exception.

“You know, Barry,” I said, “you and he aren’t so far apart, in reality. He may believe in Bollum, where you would rather believe in kidnapping aliens, but you are both suspicious of the power.”

“The power?”

“Fight the power!” I shouted to defuse the situation, and downed my drink.

Kurowitz followed suit. “Another round!” he called to a dazed bus boy. With that, I thought, he had decided to go all in with us.

“True time travel may be possible,” Kurowitz said with an emerging lisp, “but it still doesn’t mean we have to accept the infinite universes postulate.”

Barry shrugged. Who cares.

“Even if time travel really means moving between different universes?” I asked.

“It’s the infinity problem we discussed that other day. The green glasses problem, seen properly. Whatever.” He drank to build up the next sentence in his inebriated mind. “We cannot know infinity, we can only hypothesize it. Infinity works for math, because it is ideal, perfection. The real world demands approximation. That which cannot be approximated, well, that might as well not exist. We obsess over infinity at our peril.”

“Peril?” I repeated, not admitting my interest in the topic.

“Sure,” he said, moving a greasy hors d’oeuvres plate to the side, actually closer to Barry. For emphasis he put the pinky side of both hands on the table and then asked, slurring a bit: “How big is our universe? How many zeroes, how many powers upon powers of ten would we need to describe its volume, its number of particles? It’s an impossibly large number, a scale that we can’t even imagine, but it is still a number. How many times longer is the lifespan of the universe than our own?”

“I have no idea,” I said.

“Will our universe last forever?”

“If it doesn’t collapse on itself.”

“All right. But even if it doesn’t, at some point all energy is dissipated and nothing moves. Time stops. That moment could be billions upon billions upon billions of years from now. But will it take forever?”

And would that be heaven? I thought. Or is that hell, no time and no energy either?

Barry responded: “Let me guess. It will not take forever.”

“Exactly. Even the conceivable universe is not without end. Any reference to infinity and forever in our lives is a shortcut, meaning too large to conceptualize.”

“But if our universe exists, we have to assume that a universe existed before it, and another before that. For every fork in our reality, there are forks in other realities. The progression extends infinitely in both directions.”

“Exactly!” Kurowitz said with his open hands now pounding on the table.

“What is exactly?” I asked. “I don’t understand what that means even approximately.” I could hear myself slur, too, not that I cared much.

Kurowitz looked at me like a priest staring at a heathen about to die unbaptized.

“That assumption can’t follow. And yet it here comes again, poisoning our minds.”

“Why can’t it follow? What’s so special about this universe? Don’t we have to assume that if there was a big bang, it probably was motivated by another?”

“We don’t have to assume anything about first causes. Not from secondary effects. That is the fallacy of our age.”

“That assertion sounds suspiciously religious,” I said. “Like, scientists don’t have to differentiate miracles from causality.”

Barry asked, guilelessly in a way I’d never quite heard from him: “We are constantly drawing conclusions about causes from effects. How and why would your ‘first causes’ be any different?”

“It’s Gödel’s theorem. First causes presume a context outside the system. They can violate any theory you may have developed from within the system. In short, we can’t be sure whether we have green glasses on our eyes. We can never be sure of the first causes from our place within the system. And yet every time we jump to the infinite we pretend we know first causes.”

“But,” I said, “we all agree that I am Derek. Right?”

“We all agree – that you are an ass.” Kurowitz burst out laughing, and Barry joined him in a giggling fit.

“You’re still the agent of a paranoid conspiracy,” Barry said somewhat later. His speech was unaffected; while we were sopping up beer he had been sipping his sherry.

“To conspiracies,” Kurowitz said, lifting his glass, but neither of us reciprocated. “Oh, don’t be like that. This alleged conspiracy isn’t what you imagine at all.”

“Really,” said Barry to draw him out.

“Really. You will be quite surprised to hear. It’s actually just a game.”

“A game?” I repeated. I suddenly had a sinking, depressive feeling about this.

“Yes, an intellectual game. The matter is a bit sensitive, though, so please be discrete when discussing this with others. Even some players don’t get that it is a game.”

“I didn’t,” I said.

“Well, you’re not quite a player. You’re more like – a prop.” A suppressed laugh.

“A prop?”

“Yes. You were co-opted into the game because of that document you wrote. It fit perfectly into the scenario.”

“Okay, but what about others who have had similar visions?”

“That’s all part of the evolving back story of the game. Even I don’t know who puts these games together. But someone does. You join one or the other side, and you play out the game as if the situation were real.”

“I see,” said Barry. “And you’ve played these games before?”

Kurowitz looked at him. “Well, I haven’t, but I know people who have. People I know very well, people I can trust. I can show you the private web page where the game was announced and the rules set. I can assure you that murder is not in the rules.”

“And people are assigned to either side?”

“People pick. Most of the time there are affinities on both sides so it’s not a problem. Or maybe sometimes people pick just because of the underdog status, I don’t know.”

“Which side has underdog status in this game?” I asked.

“Yours, of course. What are the odds we’d ever find someone close to a Bollum character, no matter how hard we try? And by the way, the resolution is not the point. The point is how well you play the role you are given. I would say...” He stopped to chuckle to himself. “I would say I played my role quite well.”

“Befriend the – prop? Was that it?”

“Befriend, no. Ingratiate myself. Make myself indispensable.”

“I’m just curious,” Barry said of a sudden, “when were you recruited into this game? Perhaps after you met John, but before the MRI?”

“I think that’s right.” A suspicious glance and a sip.

“And it doesn’t seem like – more than chance that you were recruited into a ‘game’ when you were so perfectly situated?”

“I never said it was chance. My friends – acquaintances – saw how I could be meshed into their game, and they thought, well, let’s bring him on.”

“I see. And did they tell you how long they had been playing this particular game?”

“No, but I don’t see your point.”

“No point,” said Barry, “except that unless you were there at the inception of the ‘game,’ there’s really no way for you to know whether you were given the real rules, or whether you are just another prop. Gerdel is the name, I believe.”

“Yes, Gödel. But that’s just absurd on the surface.”

“So it is.”

Kurowitz looked around in frustration, and then smiled. “I can prove it.”

Barry looked around but more for effect than anything.

“Okay, how?”

“If this game were mortally serious, would I be able to do this?” Kurowitz stood up awkwardly and tottered over to another table about 50 feet away. I didn’t realize which table until he stood right over them and looked back at us.

There were three young men there and one older graying gentleman. I couldn’t place any of them. One of them could have been the young man with the pilot glasses, but that was a very liberal interpretation of my memory. Kurowitz was talking with them meanwhile, and finally one of them turned to us and lifted his cap and held out the face to us. I couldn’t make it out, but Barry could: “It’s a Ford Truck hat. F150 pick-up truck. Ford tough.”

“My assailant,” I said.

“Apparently.”

Kurowitz got a waitress to come to their table and he signaled that he was buying a round for them. The four men at that table lifted their glasses to Kurowitz and then to us.

Once back, Kurowitz said: “Convinced?”

“If it’s a game, why did he try to run me over?”

“He didn’t. He was in a hurry to park. You said yourself that there were others at the intersection, so how could he have been aiming at just you. He would have stopped if you have entered the street. He remembers seeing you.”

Barry waved that off. “You said some players don’t know it’s not a game. Why is that?”

“Recruits. Every player has to recruit another player who thinks it’s serious. Edgy, I grant you.”

“So – those individuals may think it’s deadly serious?”

Kurowitz finished his beer and looked, suddenly somber, at the desiccating suds left. “I won’t agree to the phrase, but yes. Some aren’t even told when the game ends.”

“I’m sure they aren’t,” said Barry, looking very smug. He sipped his drink and waited while Kurowitz contemplated ordering another pint. He shook it off, though, and seemed ready to go. Barry declared: “I have just one more question.”

“One more,” Kurowitz said with a sigh.

“Were you serious about living forever? That wasn’t a game, was it?”

He looked at each of us in turn and then down at the table and back up. “Gentlemen, if I was offered immortality right here, right now, at the expense of your lives, I would take it without hesitation. But I suspect that none of us will live to a day when it is remotely possible.”

“Our good fortune,” said Barry.

“Nothing personal,” Kurowitz replied. “And that was just hypothetical. The Society – sorry, I believe that when immortality is possible, it will be universally so. The Bollum thesis, you know.” Barry shook his head, not understanding. “We owe that to John.”

I looked at him and then over at Barry: “Time is nothing, energy is everything. And the control of energy is the control of everything.”

Barry looked thoughtful. “Seems self-evident, somehow.”

“A matter of focus,” Kurowitz said as he awkwardly stood up. “Keep your eyes on energy. When it flows freely, that’s when we can deploy it for the things that take us beyond the quotidian. Everything

about our species has been about hoarding energy. We need to understand that: if we can free up energy, we will ourselves be free.” He smiled at the ardor of that statement and wandered out.

“So,” I said, “game or not?”

“Oh, come on, John,” Barry said, quickly standing. I followed leadenly. “Let me drive you home. I can discharge my duty to Doreen.”

Doreen invited Barry in, and we sat in the living room. I was sobering up and tired, yet still too drunk to speak intelligently. Barry accepted an offer of coffee. Doreen was happy to have a guest and still had something of a soft spot for him. I expected him to give a long narrative, an explanation of the nefariousness of this secretive band, but what I heard was a *mélange* of Kurowitz’s “it’s all a game” spiel.

I stared. Had I misread him completely?

Doreen went to get the coffee.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“I’m discharging my duty.”

“I thought Kurowitz’s story was bunk.”

“Complete,” he said. “But you don’t need to rub it in her face, John. You had no idea all this time how dangerous this situation was. She had an inkling, but she doesn’t need to know just how close you came.”

When Doreen came back, I recognized the professional smile. She had, of course, seen right through him.

That evening I gave parts one through five of this to Doreen, thinking she deserved to know what I had been up to. Maybe I thought it would build a bridge to her, with the ex-lover finally out in the open. She said she would read it the next day, and, despite a long day at the office, she came home, made dinner and disappeared into our bedroom with the text. I stayed away until late – the lights were still on – but opened the door to find her asleep. She wasn’t as far as I had thought she would be, but she had dog-eared some pages and yellow-marked a few passages. I picked everything up and put it on her table, got ready for bed and turned the lights off. I leaned over to her side of the bed and kissed her on the cheek. I think heard a sigh but it could have been more a grunt.

The next night she tried the same thing, but had to give it up. We watched a television movie together.

Friday night, Brett headed out with some friends.

I thought about what we might do, but nothing seemed right: same old problem that nothing in character would be worth the energy. I got the movie section out from the paper and scanned it.

Doreen sat across the table from me. Tired with problems at work, I could tell, but I had no idea what they were. Had she laid off employees with “needs improvement” in their files? Had she checked in on family breadwinners packing their boxes, with fifteen years of dedication to the company? Or maybe it was office politics – she paid far too much attention to the *imbroglios*, intervened when they were inconsequential, worried entire evenings. I knew I should reach out, but I couldn’t find the sincere, honest, unforced tone that it needed. Even though I knew she would probably take anything.

“I finished it,” she said.

I looked at her to affirm what it was.

“Derek,” she said, with a heavy pause before: “of Bug World.” The words that had become almost invisible to me sounded strange in her mouth, ill suited to each other.

I wanted to ask what she thought of it as a memoir – because it had become so much more than a journal to me. I saw myself in it, saw the outlines of something that could make sense of these months, that promised to clarify my fears and maybe even end the doubts that encased my life.

“I want to tell you something,” she said. “But I want you to promise that you will listen to everything I say before you answer. Do you promise?”

“Yes,” I said. Was this a literary critique that would send me tail-between-my-legs back to my computer? Was she going to dispute what I wrote about us? Did she want us back in therapy? I had no idea.

She started at the beginning, summarizing how we had met Meg and how that therapy had led to Heinrich. How Heinrich led to Kurowitz. And from Kurowitz through the MRI back to Derek. How Bollum had arranged everything, set up Derek and me to experience our lives in parallel. How Derek and I began to doubt our own independence: Maybe I was Derek dreaming John, or we were both Bollum, feeding an imaginary Derek to an equally imaginary John.

I was thinking: The real situation does matter, but there is no resolution, no way out of this conundrum. Especially now that Derek had stopped invading my dreams. Night-time silence. I tried waking myself. Nothing came. It was for the best, however much it left question marks burned into my consciousness. At least we were done with the Keepers of the Light and the Dark Knights, little worse for the wear and tear. Doreen and I had lost some of our intimacy, but I felt sure I could win that back. She had to recognize my sincerity and dedication.

Doreen was saying something that I hadn’t anticipated, but I wasn’t sure what.

“What?” I asked.

“You misrepresent so much I don’t even know where to begin,” she said. “If you meant to write fiction, okay. But if this book is supposed to be about us, it’s not. So much is just not true.”

I looked at her and wanted to ask: What do you mean? When did this story I was living stop being true?

She had asked me to hold questions, though. I could wait. She went on: “This tells me that you need help, John.”

Help? I didn’t need help, I needed to tell this story, and she’s read it now, and she must see how it affected me, how it would have to. I couldn’t help what was inevitable.

“John,” she said, “please pay attention. I want you to get some professional care. For a time. A while. I want you to commit yourself to a clinic. Just for a few weeks. There’s a clinic I can highly recommend. It’s like a club, really. You’ll get help, get exercise, meet people, break the habits that have made these last months so hard.”

Professional care. Commit. Clinic.

Then I thought: She wants me to experience the equivalent of Derek’s waking in the hospital.

Immediately I knew my reaction was irrational.

It’s not true, she had said. I wondered why the imprecision of “it” didn’t bother me. Perhaps because I knew that “it” was no less definite than anything I might use as a label. I had nothing but questions, doubts, conspiracies, fictions, dreams, visions, wisps. And here I was again, my brain anticipating another swap-in of values from any of those external inputs, like a hapless, helpless algorithm that could only apply itself endlessly.

Doreen deserved better, I needed better. I had to swallow something back. When I had control again, I said: “I understand. I agree. I want to do whatever it takes.” She signaled for me to stand, and gave me a long hug.

Since then, I have had plenty of time to reflect. Yes, I will sign the papers. One will state that I have to forget the light keepers conspiracy, the outlines of which I had come to see in every meeting of daylight and shadow, in every hint of motion, no matter which direction I turned. Another will state that Bollum must return to his own time, for good and absolutely. Yet another will require that I affirm that Derek Sorensen is not and never will be my problem. The final sheet will declare that the “bug” species, whose physical attributes I had first elaborated so many years ago, is nothing more than a fantastical

imagining, with no foundation in reality or any science of exobiology. In exchange for these testaments, I will be free to inhabit my house again, completely, and to return to the life I once knew and lived so much better than now. My signature is all it takes. And I give it freely.

There is only one thing that I will add to the bottom of those papers and to this chronicle. I found it during one unusual dream, scrawled in three languages on the wall of the same cave where Derek and I had met Poulus the hermit. I am not sure whether these words were supposed to be his, or were left before or after Poulus's time in that ascetic's dwelling. Of course, in truth I dreamt them up on my own. I have my doubts that they make any real sense – especially with the missing conjunction – but even in ambiguity they have helped me. I have begun to use them like a mantra, and some day I will write them on my own wall:

Noli mortem timere. Ama vitam.

Fürchte dich nicht vor dem Tode. Liebe das Leben.

Don't fear death. Love life.

The uncertainty of what we don't know about our universe, once accepted, can lead us arbitrarily far. What we know about this chronicle: The narrator is John Densch, a frustrated husband, father and low-level technocrat who starts the whole ball rolling with a joke about a "bog monster." We meet his wife, Doreen, who wants so badly for John to move beyond the imaginary ensnaring him, but finds that everything comes with a price; Bollum, a voice in young John's head that told him tales of alien abduction and of a technological utopia for humanity, albeit one with an expiration date; and Derek, an abductee trapped on Bug World, at first a character in Bollum's tales, but in time an alternate existence for John. As John is jolted from one conflict to another, on earth and in his head, he encounters questions big and small about faith and self-reliance, meaning and trust. Like Derek, he must decide to return to his normal life, or not; both know what they must swallow to get there.

